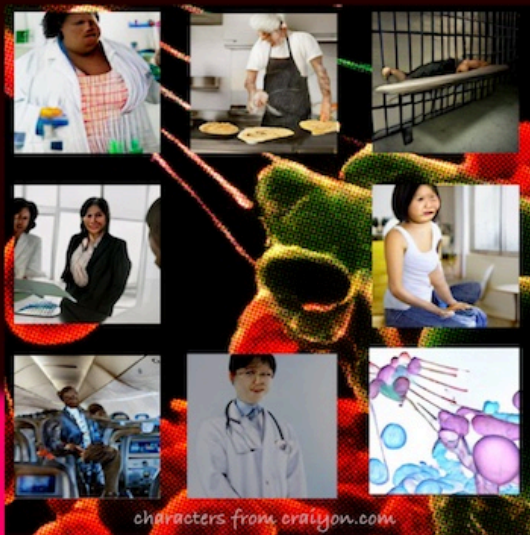


RANDY MICHAEL RESNICK



StingerBots

It's 2052: Does your fridge know where you are?

StingerBots

And other stories

Randy Michael Resnick

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“Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.”

Oscar Wilde

StingerBots

Sausalito, NorCal

She hated steamed courgettes, yet here she was, dealing with a small pile of round slices on the side of the *Pollo con champiñones* he'd prepared for her. Truth be told, she wasn't a huge mushroom fan, either, preferring more traditional Mexican fare like pollo en mole poblano. but she had to admit, the food was good enough to make her reconsider her prejudices. "We all play a role" , she told herself, "and this is an important mission." As missions go, it was. The 36 contiguous states of the Mexican Federation needed the North California Territory to complete its western arm. NorCal was an important card to acquire, if nothing else, for the wine. The cyber economy had moved to Texas after the split of Northern and Southern California.

Well before the 2050's, Tamara Carnero would have been the first to describe herself as a "triple minority". She was female, Hispanic and pansexual, in order of appearance. Ironically, none of these were minorities these days. She was the perfect candidate for the job at hand. The fedpols weren't sure how easy it would be to swing the NorCal acquisition or even what sexual orientation the agent would be, so who better to send than Tamara? She had it all. Brilliant, but she could converse with anyone without making them feel uncomfortable or inferior. She could convincingly flirt with and, if need be, seduce anyone, of any race, age, or sexual orientation. That talent, mostly innate, was hugely sought-after in this era of post-Puritanism. She could eat things she detested for

the cause, such as steamed courgettes. “Fucking politics” , she thought, “politics is my job.” In this day and age, sex and politics are openly coupled, bedfellows, to coin a phrase or two. Lobbyists had been replaced in this second half of the 21st century by sex workers who were highly skilled and underwent extensive diplomatic training. Money was defeated, no longer a thing. Now it was all about raw, unapologetic power. While still symbolized by credits, power was no longer money, per se.

Things seemed to be going well. This guy Noah, whose features Tamara initially thought slightly effeminate, was a decent cook and there was no ambiguity about how either of them expected this evening to end. Obviously, he was in the same business as she was. They were like two predators, circling each other mentally. He laughed at her jokes, which she slowly shifted into more sophisticated degrees. She smiled at his comments, complimented his cooking — the chicken wasn’t half bad — and gave him the look that few men or women ever resisted. It all was going well if body language was anything to judge by. She should have been more suspicious of how easy it was going to be. Occasionally, you just got fucked and the mission failed anyway.

After the meal, they naturally shifted to more serious discussion over papers.

Noah brought out some designer tequila that came from her home state in Mexico, Estado Libre y Soberano de Jalisco. God, he was clever. While they were poring over a map, side by side, the inevitable happened. They turned toward each other to speak and, side by side, were so close their lips brushed each other. This kind of first moment only happens once in a meeting of two strangers, whether it’s followed by a lifetime partnership or 20 minutes of passion. Any residual inebriation from alcohol or weed is amplified by a thousand, and in that instant, an albeit temporary

infatuation begets a memorable scene. Tamara wanted to say something absurd like “Well, that was better than over-cooked zucchini!”, but thought better of it. The mission was back on her mind, though the moment of pleasure was intense. In fact, she didn’t recall ever making love with any man with a comparable ejaculation, one that amplified her orgasm considerably. Noah was simultaneously thinking he’d unleashed a “tremendous fountain”. Both partners were feeling a strong elation that went far beyond good sex or success in the business at hand. The Earth rarely moved for those “on the job”, one of the few that still existed in the power economy. When Noah asked Tamara to stay with him rather than go to her hotel, she was flattered. She acquiesced, even though she wouldn’t have her post coital kit available. Hell, Noah seemed clean, affable, trustworthy and wouldn’t be that kind of problem. Sexually-transmitted disease was eradicated, although minor rashes and irritations were not. Contraception was in place and could be switched off any time a woman wanted to conceive, so that was not an issue. She didn’t want to do anything to her body that would wash away the sensation she was feeling. Neither had experienced that delicious genital tingling before. Each thought the other had cleverly made use of some kind of special chemical lube, but this wasn’t something career sex diplomats would do or discuss while working. A few hours later, they made love again, beyond the call of duty. Again, both felt those unique sensations, but conversation had to remain professional. The next day, they drew up the plans for how the new state would become part of MexFed. It all looked great. And felt great.

Los Angeles, SoCal

It was one week later that Tamara had a physical. She consulted the doctor algorithm about the slight nausea and missed period. The exam confirmed what she already knew, she wasn't pregnant. She hadn't had relations with a male for months before that night with Noah. She hadn't done anything with a man since, either, as a precaution. The doctor was troubled, too, and said in a reassuring female voice that they'd need to send the lab work out, but pregnancy could be ruled out as a cause of the symptoms. Diplomats' medical transcripts were fully conveyed to superiors for obvious reasons. Worried about losing her job, Tamara hadn't mentioned one of the symptoms to the doctor at all: memory loss. She'd been noticing odd holes in her recollections of simple things, things she needed every day to survive in her profession. This is the kind of thing people start to experience at around 65 or older. "What did I come in here for?" At 42, Tamara, who indulged only rarely in moderate drug use wasn't a candidate for memory loss of any normal origin. Worse yet, memories were not exactly gone, they were blurry or inaccessible. When she looked for her car keys, for example, she remembered putting them in a drawer. The drawer she pictured was an unfocused view of her hands on the dresser in her college campus housing, decades before. How could she explain that to a computer program?

Meanwhile, the paperwork Tamara and Noah had hammered out together (she smiled to herself, thinking about that phrase as it brought back an image of that night) was in the process of being turned into legal agreements, treaties, and legalese, by the pols and lawyers of the Mexican Federation. With the unknown diagnosis hanging over her head like the Sword of Damocles, Tamara worked her usual hours at the office, but with a constant feeling of

dread. She'd decided not to have any physical contact with the woman she'd been sleeping with on and off for the past few months, until she knew she was clear of any kind of condition that could be contagious.

Two encrypted messages awaited her one morning when she logged in at the office a week later. One, from the legal sharks, was related to the NorCal agreement. The other was the lab work, which she opened first. What she read plunged her into a kind of tension she'd rarely felt. According to the most advanced AI diagnosis, she had a yet unidentified virus that was multiplying in her brain. It was thought that it was interfering with some neural connections that managed memory. It was the arrival of a third email, timed to self-destruct over her encrypted diplomatic channel that chilled her to the bone.

Tartu, Estonia

A few months earlier in that same year, Vasiliy, a Russian medical researcher at the prestigious von Bunge Institute, was having the worst day of his 28-year existence. The love of his life coldly announced out of the blue that she was no longer interested in him romantically, but that they should remain friends. If this wasn't bad enough, he'd put his rent-controlled lodgings in her name, after learning that he was no longer eligible for them. Having no desire to live in the loft space and no longer enjoy physical intimacy with the only woman he'd ever had sex with, he would be forced to find a new place to live. The salary of unproven, unpublished postgraduates, while over the limit for subsidized housing, was less than the monthly amount needed for even a modest studio apartment. To add to Vasiliy's woes, his rats at the institute seemed to be suddenly at a loss to perform in the mazes and experiments he had so cleverly designed. Things were not going well, but he threw himself into the work. In the day's observations, rats were constantly attempting to mate with any other rat within range, regardless of its sex, something they wouldn't ordinarily do. More worrisome, though, they'd eat anything in their vision that didn't move. As for mazes, the rats acted as if they'd never seen a maze. They had no idea what the water tubes were for, ignoring them completely and were soon dying of dehydration.

There are certain women who are systematically attracted to the brooding Slavic type that Vasiliy had become. It is the challenge of "fixing" such men, not a romantic or sexual attraction. What more contrasting personality type is there than Anajah Waller, the AfAm with flashing blue eyes and an outgoing personality and confidence that might either kill or cure a man in

Vasiliy's present state.

In this part of the world, people with dark skin like Anajah's were rare. Only in Africa ("darkest Africa?") and parts of North America was deep blackness the more common tone. After a long, destructive period of racial rioting that began in 2024, most of what was Illinois and Michigan became one district where the large majority of the population was Black. In Chicago City-State, as it is now called, interracial procreation is highly frowned upon. Black citizens with lighter skins were ostracized by the general Black population and skin darkeners were sold everywhere in the place of skin lighteners. Nor were there many opportunities to mix sexually, since the relatively few Caucs were either elderly, too old to move away, or had some position in the community that rendered their presence acceptable. They moved freely among the community, were social right up to the limits of romance and sex, which were a strong taboo in the district.

Anajah looked more African than most, but it wasn't any more shocking than her American accent. It didn't matter that she was not beautiful in the way an actress might be, or that she didn't move like the sexy singers in those Sen538 ASR videos. She had an undeniable charm and energy, and she brimmed with intelligence. Vasiliy had resisted her every attempt to connect on a personal level when he was smitten with the woman who shared his apartment and his bed. Looking for distraction from the deep sadness and worry that his days now brought, he raised his head when she commented about his cherished rodents.

"I've seen this before. It's a xenocorps system that scrambles the rats' memory. In Russia, they've successfully weaponized this. In America, it has been rumored to have been used in the private prison system. That version actually encrypts the neuron

connections, causing what was initially called “silent engrams”. Because of this, it was necessary to also develop a decryption algorithm. Where did the rats come from?”, she asked.

“Were bred here”, said Vasiliy, “but come to think, pantononic RTC links in their cages were of Moscow. Delivered same day this shit starts”, he finished, with his strong accent.

She had his attention now, because an idea had formed in his head. An idea that would obviate his financial problems, and, in turn, help him find a mate that wasn’t virtual. An immoral plan, but when you are heartbroken and desperate, morals become fuzzy. What if, with Anajah’s help, he could learn to control the system in a way that would allow him to cause a frightening memory loss in a person, then ask them to pay a sum of money to kill the “virus” and restore their memory? Before he got too far in his reasoning, he wondered, though, how did she get out of Russia alive knowing what she knew? Borderline suspicious.

It was a criminal tactic that had proven to be extremely lucrative in the early part of the century, involving encrypting computer files and holding them for... ransom. Yes, it was called “ransomware”. With the right victim, they had no choice but to pay to unlock the data. Suppose a government wanted to put pressure on an enemy. What better way to use a horrific technology than to threaten what is most precious to a person whose influence would be worth the risk? It was powerful cybercriminal tool.

Working with his new confidante, “Solnyshko” as he called her, he was careful not to reveal any intention or ambition. They replaced the comm links in the cages, but he was afraid to say anything to the Russian supplier out of fear. If the creators of these bots knew he’d seen them by accident, he’d quickly and quietly

disappear. All he wanted to do was cure the rats. In that process, he was able to collect all the knowledge necessary to carry out his plan. For half of this century, the study of the brain and memory has slowly progressed. The understanding of engrams was thought to be the key to avoiding, and possibly curing memory loss conditions like dementia. Vasiliy came to understand that the memories were stored in encrypted form, not destroyed or silenced engrams. That meant they could be restored at any time, even years later, if the key was known. While they worked together, he was also careful to keep inside the growing affection he had for Anajah. He didn't think she'd ever want to be a part of any nefarious scheme like the one he expected to be his road to riches. He did nurse the dream of sex with her, though despite her seeming lack of interest. During the development of the decryption process, he also came to devise a way to download the nanobot data in its scrambled form and decrypt it. "Holy shit!" Although not in real time, this could be used to "tap" a mind. Right now, his interest was to be able to demo the process.

Anajah was about to bid him goodbye to return to her home near Chicago, to take a new job at a lab in the central part of her native country. Only very special people held jobs now, because work wasn't needed to gather or produce food, housing, or connect to pleasure. Vasiliy and Anajah were both the kind of people who had genius-level intellects and were smarter than the algorithms running most of the world. Most of their peers were ethical and content with their lot, so Anajah had no reason to suspect Vasiliy of any foul play. When they kissed each other on the cheek, there was no spark of love, just two friends parting.

After a lot of cold trails on the dark web, he finally met a broker who he knew would be able to arrange a sale of the two substances he'd produced. One contained the suspension of

StingerBots, the other a chemical that would neutralize their effects. The broker, who he would never meet, would make a deal using blockchain and act as his agent. He would make the Curren+ly monetary transfers to Vasiliy and deliver the product to... well, Vasiliy would never know. There would be no paper or email trail at all, everything was encrypted and timed to expire. The physical package would travel by “mule” to the geographical area where the buyer wanted to operate, because, encrypted or not, all networks were dangerous. In a few short months, Vasiliy would solve his financial problems.

Los Angeles, SoCal

Tamara couldn't stop the chills from overcoming her as the third email sunk in. It was from an untraceable source with a demand that she at first didn't understand. The first part explained that she'd been injected with nanotechnology that would render her memory increasingly inaccessible over a period of a few months. Initial symptoms of nausea and such would go away, it was a reaction to the invasive foreign objects in the bloodstream. Memory loss could be reversed, but only by the mysterious group that was manipulating her influence. The cure for this was available... at a price. The demand wasn't for money, though. It was for her to make sure that the NorCal deal went ahead despite objections from her committee. In order to get the cure, she would have to make sure that the majority vote, three out of the five on the committee, agreed to NorCal's terms. As if this wasn't enough to be traumatized by, the email also explained that Noah had knowingly "injected" the virus into her. The chills gave way to violent vomiting. She wanted to bury herself under the covers and sob, but that wouldn't produce any kind of resolution. Tamara had to let herself calm down to reason clearly. She had weed and other legal drugs and alcohol in the house, but she knew none of this would help. She had to think this through and decide what course of action to take.

When she felt calm enough to reflect, and after getting past the disgust of what that bastard Noah had done to her, and that she'd enjoyed it at the time, she tried to make a mental list of possible actions. Do nothing and see if memory keeps fading? That would risk passing the point of no return if she wasn't able to do what was necessary. Go to the authorities? What authorities? With what proof? She didn't completely believe the threat herself, so it wasn't

likely that anyone else would. Masked IPv8 addresses, encryption, it was an evenly-enabling technology for both good and evil. Was it out of the question to use her influence to effect a change in two other committee members votes? Unconscionable! But worth thinking through. She could sell out her own vote in this way, she had little choice if she wanted to avoid living as a vegetable in an asylum prison next year. The committee was made up of three women and two men. One of the women, Alicia, was Tamara's ex-boss and former lover. Tamara had gotten a transfer to get out from under Alicia's pernicious influence. Now she was awarded with starring dagger glares when the two happened to meet in a hallway. Tamara really didn't get grudges. She recalled hearing once that holding a grudge was like... what? It was happening again, memories were there but vague and blurred. Thinking about all of this was unbearable, but if she didn't address the problem now, Tamara would eventually lose all capacity to think at all.

River North, FSA

Anajah lost both her parents the same year Noah lost his mother during the same coast-to-coast wave of unrest in the '20s. They were both doctors, and ran a free family health clinic on 63rd Street. One day, while Anajah was in school, a riot started, and police tanks were sent into the neighborhood. Some looters started a fire at the business next door to the clinic. A spark was thought to have ignited some paper towels next to the oxygen tank. The tank exploded like an incendiary bomb, killing both her parents, the Wallers, an assistant and 15 patients. An only child, Anajah had only her friend Snake to turn to. He was like a big brother to her. Like her, he was orphaned at a young age, he got it. Having no other family, when she grew up, she knew she didn't want to practice medicine like her parents, but went into research, which was one of the few actual jobs in existence, for those capable of doing it.

River North was a big change from Estonia, and an even bigger one from Russia, where Anajah had begun as a lab assistant/intern a few years ago. Some things felt the same, but a lot had changed. Still, the new responsibilities were stimulating. After so much time abroad, her co-workers seemed so American, so insular. Although they all possessed a strong intellect, they had no idea what it was like elsewhere, and they weren't very curious, either. They were used to working and socializing with their own kind, where she had lost that in the past few years and rejoiced in the diversity. She didn't talk about her research projects in Eastern Europe, since they all involved non-disclosure agreements, and no one asked. This kind of NDA, if betrayed, was pretty much like a death warrant. They did often ask about working with Browns & Whites, to which she replied that "under the skin, everyone wants the same things".

As department head, Anajah needed to closely follow new developments. Several months after arriving back in Chicago, the news about NorCal broke and she was the first to hear about it. That a deal was reached to allow the annexation of NorCal to the Mexican Federation didn't surprise her. What did was the involvement of Tamara Carnero, a woman she'd met in L.A. when she was just out of school. The Tamara Carnero she knew would never have been behind such a deal. Anajah knew this because Tamara, despite her own Mexican heritage, was against the idea of growing the country in that way. She never would have approved, let alone fought hard for this. One of her objections had to do with the ban on hiring Spanish-speaking Mexicans, supposedly to "lower the risk of industrial espionage". While everyone spoke Spanish in Los Angeles — it was a requirement to live or work there — almost no one did in NorCal. Anajah easily learned languages and spoke fluent Spanish, English, French and enough Russian to live and work among them without friction. She totally got Tamara's frustration with what she saw as a kind of "reverse white privilege". But then, neither she or Tamara were white. Maybe that was more to the point.

Anajah decided to find Tamara's preferred network, and ping her, saying she'd returned to Chicago. Then, perhaps after some light video sex play, she'd casually ask about the sudden change in Tamara's stance on new Mexican anexións. She'd have to schedule, though, because the shimmering red fiber at the junction box meant someone important in her peer network was enduring an SDoS attack. Anajah and many of the people she knew were on smallish peer networks, while "civilians", as they called them, got their connection from a taxed and metered monolithic corp called Santen. The hackers called it "Satan", hence the name "Satanic Denial of Service". Most people were on RS, Regional Salary. It

was no mere stipend, people lived decently on it, and had health and minimal services like utilities covered. Anajah had her junction set up to use the basic access like everyone else, but anything significant, like calling Tamara, would be switched to the p2p.

Sausalito

After the memorable night with Tamara, Noah Klein was pleased with himself. He initially took her to be a lesbian, she had that confident “you’re just a man” vibe. That wouldn’t have mattered personally to him at all, except for the job he had to do. In the end, though, her calm assurance was refreshing. As soon as the NorCal pols found out who was coming north to deal with them, Noah got the job of every man’s dreams. He pictured the classified listing: “Responsibilities will include spending an evening with an attractive, intelligent woman, ending with coitus and at least one vaginal ejaculation.” Ensuring she did not use spermicide or any other product until morning was a detail the want-ad probably wouldn’t need to include. He’d done his job, alright! That last moment felt like he had a fire hose and was trying to put out a roaring blaze. At the same time, every pulse felt like an electric current flowing from him to her. He felt that tingle all the way to his toes! Did she feel that? She too appeared to be in an ecstatic moment that clearly took her by surprise. Her face lit up as if she was discovering her first meeting with the big O. Ok, they were, after all, both pros. They were legitimate sex workers in the new diplomacy. The old saying about doing work you love was never truer than this night, especially with all risk removed... or so Noah had thought. What he didn’t realize was that the “physical” he was given a week earlier to make sure he didn’t have any sexually transmissible disease, actually was done to implant something far worse than chlamydia into the innocent person he was chosen to “seduce”. Seduction was just another tool of the diplomatic trade. They’d even exchanged a few emails with the notion that if the deal worked out, they’d drink a glass of Champagne, perhaps followed by a virtual sex workout. Yeah, it went flawlessly, Noah thought. That thought was giving him a

pleasant warmth in the groin. Ironically, it was the last clear memory he'd be able to access for a long time. He was about to call his grandfather to arrange to meet in The City for a meal, when the door bot chimed. "POLICE" said the badge on the physical video screen as the door was rammed open.

Stingers (Estonia)

This new variation on the nanobots were called ‘StingerBots’. They were specifically designed to be implanted rather than passing through the digestive system like the prison version, or injected like the military serum. When dealing with diplomats, giving an injection or tampering with food would be more difficult than modifying the result of the job they did, which ultimately involved sleeping together. This technology was a diabolical combination of sex toy and virus-like attack. It could work in any sexual pairing where liquids were exchanged, including orally, although the sensations related to that would be alarming. In the throes of ecstasy, the sparkly, scintillating feeling of the partners didn’t feel scary, it just felt like the best sex ever. How ironic that the dumpy and unexciting Vasiliy had developed the technique after his rats had been accidentally exposed to the original nanobots. He studied the effects with Anajah, his assistant. Once he’d extracted all of her knowledge and help, she conveniently left for home. This left the field clear to start developing a new version. His epiphany came at the same time he did — while experiencing the highest quality porn version of Anajah, designed to his specs. All he had to do was combine the physical orgasmic sensations with the navigation system that the StingerBots would use to traverse the nervous system. Surreptitiously invading the brain within a week, they would place themselves as a man-in-the-middle attack on the neural connections. Memories traversing the connection would be altered in a way that made them vague, insubstantial, and inaccurate. It wouldn’t be easy finding the right client. The military of any nation would have to imprison or kill him to ensure secrecy. That’s probably what happened to the original Russian scientist who invented the neural encryption part. One day he was thrilled to have succeeded in an amazing medical

feat, the next, it was as if he never existed. No, this would have to be a criminal enterprise, protected by layers like the blockchain, torrents and onion routers back in the day. Funny thing was, the military could be the end client since he'd never know who exploited the technology.

Los Angeles

After a sleepless night, there did not seem to be many courses of action for Tamara to pursue. A thought struck her just when she was fading into sleep: She knew a lot of people. Did she know anyone in the sciences or medicine who might believe her story or even know something about this memory encryption phenomenon? She herself hadn't heard anything about it before the shock of yesterday's message. Then she fell into a deep slumber. She didn't know what time of morning it was when the com table gently vibrated, waking her from troubled dreams. Looking up at it, she saw a black avatar with big blue eyes and exaggeratedly big hair. It had been a few years, but she only knew one person who had the cojones to use that image. It had to be Anajah Waller!

Instant communication was made possible by developments over the second quarter of the 21st century. Long lag and talking over each other were a thing of the past. Holovision and sound were as good as being in the same room. Primitive predictive technologies had been used to "guess" the next word that would likely be typed on mobile devices. Thirty years later, the system was trained in the user's oral expressions and visible body language. The speed of light could be tricked into giving up its limits. This worked well enough to form a coherent and realistic instantaneous, high quality presence. Similar code was being used to create surprisingly accurate simulations of loved ones, both human and animal. With enough memory and computational speed, any task can be broken down and accomplished.

River North, Chicago

Anajah was glad she'd messaged Tamara. After some polite chatter and play, she asked about Tamara's mental state with regard to the agreement, as planned. Instead of a brusque "None of your business" response she half-expected, the question was greeted with an oceanic wave of sobbing that she allowed to wash over her. Tamara recounted the story from her viewpoint. Within days, she experienced strange symptoms and detected concrete memories were disappearing. As the doctors could find no physiological cause nor proffer a diagnosis, Tamara was forced to believe the memory encryption threat was real.

"What's the first thing you remember from your youth?", Anajah asked her.

"Lots of foggy impressions, hugs from parents, laughter. Miss Blunt was the principal of my elementary school. It's annoying to think space is taken up in my memory for things like that! What possible use..."

"We don't know how human memory is structured. Maybe there is no concept of 'space', no limit on that level. It isn't as if a FIFO or LIFO stack is in our brain." Before Tamara could ask, she continued, "First in first out or last in last out, as in computer memory architecture. What about recent memories. Do you remember details of your last assignment?"

Tamara felt a slight sexual tingling sensation spurred by the question, but mused, "I only can bring up the basic idea of the treaty, no details. What we talked about, other than work, is a complete blur. Fortunately, the professional agreements and terms were in the notes I took and report I prepared the next day. Going back further, the last few weeks are a little blurry, yet I can

remember every moment you and I spent together."

Anajah flushed with the pleasure of those times. "Me too!"

There was no need to justify the morality of her actions, it was self-defense. A political structure was changed by "lobbying". Some would prosper, grow rich, access power, while others would lose out or be discontented. No lives would be directly lost, no person maimed as a result of this, whereas, had she refused, her own conscious life would have been taken away. There was no choice but to pay the "ransom". What she hadn't counted on was the fact that no cure, no decryption method, no other contact came from the original petitioner who made the initial threat. What if, after capitulating, they never did?

Anajah was horrified by the story she'd heard and shocked by the immediate realization that Vasiliy's rat project was connected to this terrible new form of ransomware. Dealing with her disappointment with her former co-worker would have to wait, because she was going to have to act quickly to either unearth the existing decryption methodology or develop one herself. She knew plenty about nanobots, but nothing about encryption as it might apply to brains of rats, let alone humans. She'd only been exposed to the vaguest allusions of the concept in Russia, and who knew how true any of that really was. She would have to right the wrong created by her own unwitting part of the research.

Estonia

Anajah had left the institute for a position as respected technical advisor and head of department at a River North nanotechnology lab. She kept up in her field of nanomedicine, devoured all the journals and watched various news feeds. Vasiliy missed interacting with her during work. He had to admit, he might never have solved the rats riddle without her insight. However, it wasn't her insight that he was pondering at the moment. It was her small, hard breasts and carefully shaped public bush on the 3D reader desk in front of his cot in the lab. Despite her size, quite a bit larger than his scrawny self, he was smitten. It hurt when he realized that he would never have her physically in the real world. Her sexuality was ambiguous, but her lack of interest in him sexually was not.

As a researcher, Vasiliy had access to almost any brain-related medical hardware. With his brooding sad sack looks, he was lucky he didn't have to attract a live sex partner since the institute's hardware was compatible with the latest open source porn software. Even in the 1990's the Internet was chock full of images of every kind of sex imaginable, and then some. These were simple 2D videos. In this advanced era, post 2050, known on the street as "2K.1", there were three kinds of porn the population used openly and without shame. "Old school" was the cheapest and lowest-technology. It was as if 1999 called and was talking dirty to you while you masturbated. Based on either recorded or live video (this wasn't free), you could hook up online and take matters into your own hands. For those who didn't get off on that, the next level was the basic hardware, a combination of the Internet of Things (IoT) and motorized sex toys. Connected, multi-frequency, controllable vibrators could be used alone, with

online imagery or live “consultants”. The hardware was cheap, needed to be cleaned after each use and wore out too soon. The ultimate level was the one that people like Vasiliy has access to. This used NetzRTC (Netz Real Time Communication), requiring a low latency fiber connection. The clincher was that computer-generated, lifelike imagery was built to the user’s specifications, either from a catalogue of beautiful models (or horribly disfigured or otherwise ugly ones if that was your thing), or, better still, from a photo supplied by you. Anajah’s selfies showed her tongue and sexy, full lips and big blue eyes. He’d never fully seen her breasts, but selected the body he imagined she had, making it smaller and less imposing. His imaginary version of her was inspired by the occasional side boob or thong line spotted in the intimacy of the lab where they’d worked closely together. Other details came from discussions they had about fashions like shaving pubic hair, which they were both against. He was able to build an animated porn version of Anajah that spoke with her voice, and moved with her mannerisms. He didn’t do this while she was there, preferring to replay videos he’d stored of his first love. Once Anajah had moved on, he set about creating this Frankenstein porn fantasy and was getting more and more into it. It was during one of these sessions with the ersatz naked and compliant Anajah that his comm table buzzed. It was Pensri, a hacker chick in Bangkok, with a plan that would make him power-rich, like a broke celebrity of past ages.

Bangkok

Pensri, aka Dani to the few people who actually knew her intimately, was small. From a distance, it was hard to tell if she was an old, wizened woman, or a child. She was neither. Close up, her mixed Asian ancestry was visible, but not strong in her facial traits. Her skin was the color of café au lait, fine and smooth. She wore her pure white hair cropped very short. She wasn't exactly feminine, in fact, looked somewhat androgynous. The disinterested vibe she projected didn't attract any enthusiastic "suitors", either. That was fine with her. She hadn't been with a man for decades and it was at least 5 years since she'd slept with a woman. There was another version of her, though. Most of the time, she had her eyes half-closed, giving her that look some called inscrutable. Others compared it to the sleepy, dreamy look of opium smokers. When she was interested in something or someone, though, her eyes opened wider and became almond-shaped. Only then could you see they were blue. Anyone who saw that version of Dani up close had a visceral reaction, arousal or at least a kind of chill as if face to face with an undefinable hunger.

When she pinged Vasiliy, she could tell by his vacant, glassy eyes that he'd just finished a Netz3X session. She wondered why people bothered with self-pleasure. There were rumors that such equipment was sometimes hacked to provide experiences like injuring or murdering someone whose likeness and surroundings you could conjure at will. There were also an infinite supply of bots running CGI images through Netz. These could simulate anything from sex with reality show hosts, giant insect-like aliens or dinosaurs to slitting the throat of a child movie star. Pensri tried and failed to imagine anything that could relieve her daily sense of *déjà vu* of reality. She had used one of these rigs to slap around a particularly obnoxious pol in an online game. She saw too much

through the programming to enjoy virtual sex and anyway, she knew it was far more dangerous for a target like her than actual sex, even with a stranger. This was what she craved in the Zurich days. When the human interface tech first came out, it allowed people to try on a new gender and sexual identity, before permanent surgical changes. A man could know what a woman experienced, and a woman could experience the odd sensation of a dangling appendage.

“Was it good for you?”, she teased. She was always able to get on his nerves quickly and to her advantage. She bit her lip and adjusted her data channel to “bi-directional/neutral” immediately. In this mode, they saw each other as animated avatar faces. Unlike a regular video conference, you could be naked or have bad hair, the other person only saw an accurate representation of your face, but with the hair shown as you wished it to be, and any accoutrements you liked, such as earrings or hats. For all she knew, he was still jerking off during this session. After a short exchange of innocuous chatter which served mainly to wait out the machines establishing identity, she said, “I have your per. Voilà.” She s-queued the NetzRC coordinates and public key to Vasiliy on the data channel while saying “Qud-qud!”, the insipid mid-century equivalent of “Have a nice day”.

The City (SFO, MexFed)

Raph bristled with impatience during the conf with the Department of Corrections officer. Despite her horrible gringa accent, the woman insisted on speaking Spanish, the official language of NorCal, now a state of MexFed. She was being a jerk on purpose. “For a gringo born in the middle of the twentieth century, you don’t got much smarts!” , she told him in stilted book-learned Castilian Spanish. On the other hand, Raph felt the irony of being obliged to speak Spanish as the official language. In the 1980’s, Californians were made to vote to make English the official language and many non-Hispanic voters wanted all state business, written and oral to be conducted in the official language. Well, now they had their way, but that language was Spanish.

The woman he’d spoken to about Noah’s conviction, said “If he’s in there, he’s guilty.” It wasn’t constructive to blurt out what he was thinking, that one third of all convictions were probably bogus in one way or another, stealing years from people’s lives. There are people who can only accept one point of view: their own. You can’t talk to people like that. “Wave those thoughts away!”, he told himself.

Years before, Raph had spent a night in a jail cell for a federal crime serious enough to carry a 5-to-20-year penalty. That fear would never be forgotten, but back then, it wasn’t the time you spent in a prison, it was the rape and constant threat of violence, the total desperation that would eventually wear you down to a useless nub. The next day, he had a visitor, a pretty black woman he’d never seen before. He couldn’t quite figure it out. She wasn’t his attorney, but was she there on his behalf? He was even more surprised when she kissed him on the lips, opening hers to pass a

balloon of smack into his mouth! He didn't take it, and she gave him a strange look, but said and did nothing suspicious. The heroin dose would have been important, had he been addicted. He wasn't. While messing with the drug, he was attracted to invest in reselling it, thereby basically using for free. It was a kind of junkie pyramid scheme. It wasn't as if he was going to schoolyards, or even dealing on the street. As a kind of distributor of a controlled substance, it was very illegal. Unfortunately, a rival distributor turned in his group, police got a warrant and searched the house. They found the most incriminating evidence, an open and shut case. He noticed the next day at the arraignment, when his case came up, the judge smiled and said to his attorney, "Well, Mr. Pidger, we don't often have the pleasure of seeing you here!" The attorney was excellent: Raph was never charged. The search warrant was thrown out, due to the questionable reliability of the witness, a convicted felon herself. He never saw Lisa, the woman who came to kiss him at the surprise jail visit, but learned she was sent by his partners, as was the lawyer. He didn't go to prison that time. After that tiny glimpse, waking up with his face a few feet from an open steel toilet, he kept clean ever since. He would do everything in his power to obtain his grandson's freedom. Noah was innocent, he knew that, just as he knew that he, Raph, had been guilty, and dodged a bullet.

Ukiah, NorCal

Prison wasn't what it used to be, and that was a good thing. The most important loss in prison wasn't freedom, it was time. Prisoners didn't ever meet. There were only a few guards, one on duty per shift. The guards in prisons for men were vetted lesbians, just as the ones in women's prisons were gay men. Otherwise, temptation might easily outweigh the penalties. Surveillance cams were everywhere, but where there's a will, there's a way. In the early days, one guard in a female prisoner facility was running a lucrative business for straight men who were happy to take advantage of the inmates who were pretty much "mindless", oblivious to everything, like farm animals. That guard was quickly caught and lost most of his remaining life.

Noah Klein, who was convicted of conspiracy and blackmail in a lightning-fast mockery of a trial, arrived at the Ukiah Corrections Facility early Monday morning. By afternoon, he was in a cell alone, sitting on a bunk, slightly nauseated, confused but none the worse for wear. He looked at the contents of the minuscule cell around him, comparing it in size to the cubicle where he worked for years. In the cell, besides a bed, was a toilet, a sink and a treadmill. As the Intake Manager explained to him via a video in broken Spanish with Spanish subtitles, he would "lose his life" for several years. His body would age normally, he would eat and exercise daily. When "awakened", at the end of his sentence, after a day or two of dizziness and disorientation, he would be no different than when he went in. No difference except for how far the world had moved on and the years of life lost. Some groups were against this, calling it cruel and unusual punishment. Was it worse than beatings, rape, gangs and psychological violence? Few thought so. Others thought it to be

too humane! But in balance, the convicted were generating enough electricity on treadmills to more than pay for their meager food and lodging costs. Convictions were reversible should the prisoner later be found innocent, and there was always a chance to return to a normal life without the scars that the old penal system cut into you.

After the orientation meeting, Noah spent the night in a bottomless pit of depression, going over and over the events that led him here. That sexual encounter had become a curse. He knew he had done nothing wrong, but here he was accused and convicted of blackmailing a woman by threatening to disable her memories, in effect robbing her of her life, exactly as this prison would do to him. If Noah's grandfather was successful in proving him innocent, Noah would be restored early and compensated for the injustice by a per diem for the time spent. Meanwhile, he was a ward of the state, a state that had become a part of MexFed.

River North, Chicago

“Snake” was the only name Anajah knew him by. His real name was Remy Trudeau, but no one knew that either. He was as dark as Anajah, tall, muscular and better looking than any man deserved to be. Anajah didn’t have any tattoos, but she did admire Snake’s animated glowing tattoo, done with a special ink for dark skin. It was on his arm, just below the elbow, and what else but a writhing serpent with a gap-toothed grin, just like his. Reptiles in general don’t have a good rep, but Snake didn’t look like a criminal or a mean person, and the tattoo wasn’t menacing. He was charming, soft-spoken and dabbled in petty schemes just enough to earn a little money to live, when money mattered. Maybe more than a little, as he was always dressed simply, but nicely. He was so well-liked, he knew and jagged with both cops and criminals and people of all kinds who lived or worked the area. Snake knew about Curren+ly™ secure and encrypted rewards transfer, and any current ways, legal or illegal, to relieve a victim of his, her or their extra money. Anajah knew that Snake was more of a “rob the rich, give to the poor” guy and that he was smart enough to have never even been arrested.

Pinging Snake was the first thing Anajah did. “Baby Girl! Been a while!”, he said when they spoke. That term of endearment meant they probably would never hook up sexually. He never flirted with her, and she was a little afraid of him, so it was perfect that their friendship remained simply cordial. “I’ll always have your back.” She realized Snake was also considerably older, not that it mattered at all in this day and age. One thing they discovered they had in common was becoming orphaned early in life. Snake’s parents died in a violent attack when a firearm rights demonstration went south in the street near their home. Catching

up, they chatted about Anajah's sojourn into Eastern Europe and how very dark skin was rare there. "Russia? Nothing but Caucs! But they're very nice to anyone who's useful to them." Snake had already told her about his days as a world traveler, decades earlier. She described the current ambiance as being like when Black jazz musicians would move from New York to Paris in the mid-twentieth century, and how they were better treated. She went on to explain why she'd reached out. She recounted the unusual extortion scenario and asked him to find out what he could about such schemes. Were they common? Where were the people who pulled the strings?

"Discretion! Discretion, sweet brother! But if anyone can find out, you can!", she told him. "Discretion is my middle name!" he smiled. They signed off with the self-hugging, hand to heart gesture that had been ubiquitous since the multiple pandemics. Even in person, anyone who travelled did not touch others they didn't live with. Pandemics can sometimes become teaching moments for a whole world.

Meanwhile, she would also get someone on the decryption problem and investigate a medical path to release Tamara's memories. Maybe there was a way to kill or disable the nanobots and thus restore the memory data from its scrambled state. She closed her eyes and shook her head, thinking about that, and her heart pained for Tamara.

Chicago

Although no one actually knew Snake's real name or where he lived, he, on the other hand, knew where anyone worth knowing lived, where they worked and what they were worth. He knew prisoners and prison guards, cops and criminals. It didn't take him long to figure out that the same tools used in federal prisons to keep prisoners "quiet" were in play here. At the detention centers, medical workers injected nanobots into the brain that had the effect of disabling memory for an infinite length of time, until the process was reversed. This process required the prisoner to be fully conscious for both medical and ethical reasons. Armed with this information, Snake hopped a shuttle for Los Angeles to meet Tamara and get leads on who might be behind this. Naturally, the first thing he learned from her was the name and address of Noah Klein's grandfather. Klein had already been tried and "put to sleep" in jail. Snake would get zero official cooperation from the NorCal prosecutor, so he'd have to interview the centenarian paternal grandfather, Raphael Klein.

The City

Like most coastal cities, San Francisco's airport was located on an artificial island a few miles offshore. The tunnel that connected it to The City was filled with driverless vehicles soldiering on in sync in an orderly fashion at 200 kilometers per hour, non-stop. When they emerged to roads, they slowed, and began darting in and out of lanes effortlessly, as they plotted the fastest way to get to their programmed destinations. Raph met Snake at the airport in order to get to know him on neutral ground, but in the privacy of a closed vehicle. Personally, he was happy that few people drove now. He'd always detested driving, and imbecile drivers with their honking and flashing high beams. He hadn't driven in over 20 years, but there were a few diehards who just couldn't stand giving it up, despite expensive annual paid license, testing, and the high cost of insurance. Fortunately, the autonomous vehicle logic could take over when the human driver did something wrong. Snake, who had presented himself to Raph as an interested investigator, wanted to get as much information as possible about the incident. Raph assumed he was friendly to his grandson's case. At the personality level, they hit it off immediately. Raph had toured a lot with Black musicians. His manner towards Blacks was obviously genuinely affable and empathetic. He had always embraced diversity and gave everyone he met, regardless of origin or culture, the benefit of the doubt. Snake was able to sense this, so nothing was more natural than for them to work together closely, ostensibly to help Raph free Noah. In reality, it was to determine for Anajah and Tamara who ordered the incident that would put two people in mentally suspended animation. They chatted about music, and Snake was impressed with Raph's past career. Traffic suddenly slowed dramatically.

"Accident?" asked Snake, looking out at the sea of taillights.

"More likely some dirtbag doing the dolphin!"

Seeing the inquisitive expression on Snake's face and the color change of his tat, Raph added, "You never heard of the dolphin? It's when two drivers are in manual control and they start weaving in and out of traffic, kind of like dolphins playing. It's the most common cause of accidents."

"A-holes!" Snake thought about it for a tick and said, "The nut behind the wheel, eh?"

"Haven't heard that word in a while!", Raph nodded, smiling.

Snake noticed the buildings along Shoreline that were former tech companies long ago that were now converted into housing for the masses. He asked about it.

"In this area of the state, most of the folk who used to be homeless live there are data serfs. For most non-essentials on the grid, humanity is one big cow to be milked. In return, their basic needs are met. Like the dolphin-drivers who refuse to use autonomous vehicles, some just prefer homelessness and scuffling. They consider it to be tantamount to freedom."

"Maybe it is?", Snake reflected.

Raph estimated Snake's age to be about 60 and it was obvious he was in good physical shape and could take care of anything in the real world. He asked him about what occupied his time.

"I'm kind of a fixer of the non-violent variety. I can be an investigator, but sometimes I'm hired to try to persuade people or groups to change their approach."

"How did you get into that kind of thing?", Raph asked.

"It's a long story. I grew up in Chicago in the 90's. My parents were both doctors. They died when I was 19. The streets were ugly back then. Some still are, but I travelled around with the small sum I'd inherited. Lived in Europe, then Africa, passed through Asia and even Syria."

"That had to be intense! I was already around your age now, I'm gonna guess mid-fifties?"

Snake snickered. "The old game of subtracting about 10% from the age you already guessed, dude? You made me at early 60's, that's where I am."

The two men were bonding at a depth neither expected. Each felt in familiar territory.

"How did you live the 2020 'demic in all those travels? And what about the 2022 wave?", asked Raph.

"My various gig work sent me into a lot of embattled societies, although none were as polarized as the 50 states we used to call 'United'. It was already tenuous for most young adults. So many were driving cars, delivering food and making cold calls, few saw a future in the world at all. For me, I'd been used to the insecurity after losing my parents, but the reasonable sum of money I had, let me widen my vision of the people of this world.

What no one saw coming, was the change that made money obsolete, after the third pandemic. The first 'demic shocked folks awake. Governments were all underprepared to handle it. Few living people remembered the 1918 flu that killed 50 million, but doctors knew all about it. You'll recall it took months to flatten the infection curve. People went out in masks and the shit went back to near normal with mass unemployment."

Raph: "I was lucky to have already been retired from money-

making activity and living peacefully here. So your gig work continued?"

Snake: "It quadrupled! But the jobs themselves aren't something I remember much about. It's more the people who have stayed in my conscious memory. After the 2028 'demic, it became clear that the world couldn't exist with the structure that the west had promoted since the industrial age. The ground work had been laid for not just basic income, but a complete global resource-sharing paradigm that abandoned the use of money, jobs, salaries, work as most people worried about."

Seeing Raph's eyebrows rise, Snake also smiled: "If I were a mind-reader, I'd guess you're wondering how a street kid turned fixer knows words like paradigm?"

"Damn, you're good!", Raph exclaimed.

"Some people, and Raph, you're one of us, have an innate intellectual curiosity. If I had kids, it's the first thing I'd try to give them. Throughout the world, before returning to the US, young people were realizing that the future, by definition, belonged to them. If they had jobs, they'd be paying retired seniors' pensions. If not, they'd be on welfare or homeless. The world was already disintegrating in inequities before 2020, but the shockwaves of the two other 'demics lead into a push towards a simpler plan. That's what we're living now."

Reaching the city, the car began to optimize its routing by darting effortlessly through traffic, as all the other cars were doing. Finally, it dropped the men off at Raph's place. By that time they were joking about how Snake had missed ever being arrested for "driving while Black".

Snake was looking inquisitively at a piece of black iron that looked like some kind of steampunk art, or an instrument of

torture. When Raph saw him staring at it, he explained it was a press for making tortillas from corn flour. He asked Snake if he liked corn tortillas, the instant reply was “Absolutely, Mexican food — actually any real food — is a rare delicacy back where I live, especially now.” After Mexico began taking back California, Mexican ingredients became widely available and cheap. But the past decade, actual preparation of food had become so rare that most people were amazed by anything that didn’t originate in VacuGlass. “Why the cast iron, though? There are so many lighter materials.” Raph was always glad to slide into old school lecturing.

“Look, when I came up, shit was built to last. See those pins? And the iron isn’t going anywhere. It’s so heavy I paid a fine bringing it back overseas on a plane back then. Now, everything is made with little care by robots using plastics. You grew up in a time when everything was already software. I grew up without any software at all. When I was a kid, I built stuff out of vacuum tubes. Then transistors. By the time you were born, everything was integrated to nano sizes.” That brought his thoughts back to nanobots. The two had already discussed the details of the case as they were known, so they were more in chill mode. Raph brought out the rum arrangé he had on hand.

Snake studied Raph while he poured the drinks, then pressed the little balls of dough into thin pancakes on that lever machine and threw them on the flat pan. “Dude’s over 100 years old!” he marveled. He said aloud, “Man, you’re in damn good shape for a man who has a grandson who’s over 40. What’s your secret?” Raph chuckled, “A hundred and two is the new ninety. Here...” passing a warm tortilla to Snake and cooking one for himself, he motioned to sit at the kitchen table where a bowl of some kind of dip was sitting, along with a few hunks of cheese. “Check this

salsa out. It's mildly spicy, I can't handle the hotter peppers anymore." Offering someone real food, cooked right in front of them was a rare treat. The rich didn't feel like cooking and the poor couldn't afford decent grub, relying on the artificially cheaper low grade junk food. When drones replaced bike delivery, take-out food, which was sitting quick-frozen at local warehouses, was never more than 5 minutes away. It was reheated in the last few minutes of flight. While Snake enthusiastically praised the vegetarian taco, Raph wondered about his past. He'd known plenty of brothers from the hood back in the day. He recalled an incident where he was supposed to meet a guy named "Black" at an apartment building in the "Cadillac Valley" neighborhood of L.A. He'd never seen the man and had no idea what he looked like. Walking up to the guy who was standing at the appointed place, he was forced to nod to the man and say "You Black?". The man faked a glare at him for a half-second, before they both burst out laughing at the ridiculous nature of the question. Snake had that same affable brother look, but you knew there was a force of nature to contend with behind that.

Despite Snake's obvious connection to activities that probably skated close to the edges of illegality, he was extremely ethical in his behavior towards people. He half-believed in karma, even if he knew it was mostly in the mind of the beholder. "What goes around comes around", like the song says. He was becoming convinced that by assembling all the facts and finding the truth, he would also be helping Noah and Raph, so he just went with not revealing everything at once. He also felt strongly that someone would have to pay for this heinous act, and he fully expected to be instrumental in making that happen.

Snake couldn't meet Noah, but he could study the deposition made before his incarceration. This took way longer than he

expected, since his Spanish language skills were basic, but fortunately, translation scanners were available. He didn't have the budget for the one that connected directly to the brain, so he had to settle for one that scanned the Spanish and read it to you aloud in English in real time. He thought about the timeline involved in this crime. He decided to come clean about his reasons for coming and assured Raph they were on the same team now. Raph wanted to offer him credits, but he could tell that Snake didn't do this for that kind of gain. The man was acting for his friend and for her friend, Tamara, and now, "hopefully for us", he thought.

"Is it true that people used to live like this back in your day?", Snake grinned, waving his hand over the snacks and drinks.

Raph attempted an imitation of an old man's voice and said, "Well Sonny, after we fed the horses and oiled the wagon wheels, we partied hard!"

Snake hissed laughter through the natural gap in his teeth. "No, seriously, man, you played out, live, in a group, no DJ in sight, right? And people went out, drank together and danced?"

"When I was starting out, we played in the same club every night. Yeah, they danced, they clapped, they had fights in the men's room of the club. We rehearsed there, and one of the standing jokes was to go in the restroom and bang hard on all the walls to imitate the fights." Raph thought about how stupid this sounded now. After moving to L.A., he played permanent weekly gigs for a while, but that eventually turned into one-nighters. "The golden age for club musicians ended for me in Venice, California when the club owner told us he was taking money out of our promised amount as a rental fee for the sound system. It got worse when in one place, the guy suggested we pass the hat. One of the musicians had a pregnant woman with him, and she passed the

hat. Some people put a few bills in. At the end of the night, that owner took all the money and told us, we'd get some if there was enough, but wasn't, so it was for them. Eventually, you had to rent the room and produce the show, and then they paid nothing and got part of the door. When they start fucking with the money like that, you know it's over."

Snake felt a little like he was dreaming all of this. He wondered, was it the rum or the thought that people lived so differently only a few decades ago? He knew people fifty years ago were obese and sick with numerous diseases, allergies, addictions, and muscular afflictions. None of these issues were a problem now, thanks to the micor technology that could be introduced into the body. One of those technologies, hacked to criminal ends, was the reason he was sitting here chilling with this centenarian. Because everyone had everything without worries, there was little difference between the generations except for the life the older people had led. There was so much information about everything that happened in the hundred years since Raph was born, it was impossible to learn history. Snake knew that oral stories, often told by griots, were the main means of keeping history alive for his African ancestors. He flashed on the idea that with life expectancy now being over 130 years, barring accidents, which were rare, oral history was going to be important again. We just have to actually meet people, instead of watching them on virtual screens on our eyelids.

"I'm glad I came here to see you in person", he said. "Thanks for food and the glimpse of history." He summoned a car to take him back to the airport.

"Let's do this again", said Raph, with obvious sincerity.

Smiling, both, as they unsuccessfully tried to predict which

handshake to use, they parted with an informal wai, the Thai greeting that became the default after three pandemics shook most of the societies of the world.

On the Chicago Shuttle

With two hours to kill, Snake thought about his experience in The City. He mused about the difference the thirty years that separated him from Raph made in outlook, deciding that they'd come to a surprisingly similar place from different paths. Raph was a kid when the first presidential assassination took place. He was a young man when America was clearly losing its first armed conflict in Southeast Asia. At 50, the impact of the planes intentionally crashing into buildings in New York and Washington sent shock waves around the world and led to many conspiracy theories. But when Snake was becoming a man, he and Raph, at 20 and 70 respectively lived through the most discussed phenomenon worldwide, the 'demic, as it came to be called. By then, Raph was not working, not a part of the economy in any big way, where Snake was still in his own private gig economy. Life was all delivered food, binge drinking and post-AIDS sex, but Snake wasn't a part of that or the cocaine world. Raph cooked and mixed punch, made liqueurs, grew salad. It seemed that he always had. Snake had never done anything in a kitchen, but some of his contemporaries had meaningless, unfulfilling jobs in food prep or service. All those were history, it was one of the first things to be automated. In the driest times, he'd driven ride share, a gig that quickly disappeared with autonomous vehicles, along with the staple work of truck drivers. The mechanization of factories was trivial compared to making self-driving cars, so that entire segment of the economy disappeared over his young adult life. All this was happening with slow but certain revolution in the thinking of the young. What was there to look forward to? How was life going to be after this alternating pattern from quarantine and lockdown to orgiastic sexual and other lifestyle practices? Those who had the aptitude, decided it was high time for a change. They began by not just seeking power but aiming to

become it. That's how "The Power" movement was born. Human egos being what they are, the idea of power would never disappear. That it would become the entire economy, with nothing else having any desirable value was unimaginable when he was younger, but at this point it seemed perfectly logical.

The City

After Snake left, Raph thought about how it was time to give Noah's grandmother a call. He and Pensri were distant, but cool. "Du wirst immer in meinem Herzen sein", she told him in German. "You'll always be in my heart" and after a soft kiss on the cheek, it was the last time he saw her. That was nearly 30 years ago, so it was fortunate that the universal directory problem had been solved by the Dyork command. There was no need for phone numbers, or phones, for that matter. Speaking to himself, he said "Dyork!", the directory prompt popped up, and he waved in her name. Before he initiated the call, he took care to leave the data channel off. Pensri had become quite the infamous hacker over the years, with wicked talent. Back in the Zurich days, she called herself "Dani", short for Daniela. As soon as that name came up, the scene of them screwing in her car in a parking garage of a large Zurich department store started playing in his head. She was straddling him in the front seat on the passenger side, the little car rocking like crazy. Suddenly, there was a loud and persistent knocking on the window and the anguished face of a well-dressed woman glared in asking "Ist alles in Ordnung?". "Ja, ja!" Dani moaned, which excited him over the cliff. The older woman took the hint, and left disgusted. The couple couldn't stop laughing. It wasn't the best sex he'd ever had, but it was by far the most memorable, thanks to the horrified, if small, audience. Ironically, it was also the moment of conception of Noah's father, Raphael, which is probably why he thought of it now.

Tartu, Estonia

The huge wooden doors at the entrance of the institute exploded inward, causing Vasiliy to fall from his lab stool, dragging a precious beaker of nanobots with his lab coat as he crashed to the floor. Shaken, he looked up to see four men aiming weapons directly at him. One of the men shouted, "Blyat' lezhat', ruki za golovu, ne dvigat'sya!", while another bent down, reaching over to clap his wrists in heavy ties. He knew this would be one of the last days of his life. Too scrawny and frightened to escape, he grabbed a shard of broken glass covered in the viscous liquid and tried to cut the hand of his captor. His final reward, a bullet in the head, put an immediate end to his life. Unfortunately, the soldier was wearing gloves that stopped the StingerBots from entering his bloodstream via a cut.

Bangkok

“Danièlà.” There was a long pause. Unlike avatar-driven connections, the two former lovers could see each other's entire body and surroundings in real time. They had nothing to hide.

“Raphael? No one calls me that anymore! I was just thinking about you.”

“No one calls me Raphael, either, dude. After all this time, you still think of me?”

“Only when I see people making love in cars. They either forget to turn on the shade or don't care and put on a show like the one... anyway, I just got home.”

He was stunned to hear her refer to the very incident he remembered a moment ago, but better get to the point. “Dani, I'm afraid I'm calling with some bad news about Noah.” Just then she set down a bag and he noticed she had a pencil-sized hole going all the way through her left palm.

“Those were the days, huh, before...” she began, but he cut her off, asking “What the fuck did you do to your hand?”

“Didn't hurt, it was done surgically by a laser, and of course I didn't need anesthesia. A job went south about four years ago”, she said. “This is how they mark you, so that anyone else knows what you do. What's funny is, that scheme backfired, because it's now very fashionable, I've seen it on both men and women. Like unlocking an achievement badge. What's happening with Noah?”

“He's in prison, already in a memory sleep state. I think he was collateral damage on a nefarious political plot. I'm wondering if

you can help me get him freed. I know he couldn't be guilty."

"What's he supposed to have done?"

Raph launched into the story, expecting her to question some of the details, but surprisingly she let him get to the part about the Mexican woman losing her memory before she shouted, "Wait a minute!"

Pensri recognized the story and her voice, somehow harder, now replaced the Dani voice of a moment ago. The kind of people who contacted Pensri for hacks were not forthcoming with any details. She never wanted to know anything that wasn't necessary to accomplish the gig. In this case, though, she could put together the timing of the story and the work she did with Curren+ly to ensure a large but untraceable payment... to someone, somewhere. If this involved getting Noah imprisoned for something he didn't do, she'd have to disassemble this crime and make it right. Raph told her to expect a visit from Snake, describing him honestly and suggesting she share anything she could with him. She asked if he thought he was into plastiflash. Same old sense of nasty humor.

"I don't know about Snake, but I might be!"

"You'd have to leave the data channel on from that place you call your man cave."

"Truth! You can ask Snake yourself, he laughed. I'll bet he's quite the ladies' man and has a very hip tattoo, just your style. "

Talking to Dani put Raph in a nostalgic mood. He'd lived the so-called sexual revolution, the peace and love hippie days between 1968 and 1975 or so, for him. This was before cellphones, wifi and powerful personal computers. Social networks were CB or amateur radio, and neither held a way to

swipe left or right, nor were there any visuals possible. Female voices on those networks were rare, so hookups were too. Still it did happen at least once. There were computers alright, he and his workmates played around with machine language on an 8-bit AIM that had an adding machine roll as its only output. He remembered sleeping with one of the women at the office. Sex was everywhere, porn was for kids with flashlights under the covers back then in the twentieth century. In this day and age, you could literally enjoy sex online without a direct brain interface. It all happened with a featherweight immersion visor and a thin fabric suit, briefs for men, bikini-like for women. Suddenly he regretted not asking Dani if she wanted to make love. With her Pensri persona, though, that could be dangerous.

He remembered touring with bands, the thrill of talking to “chicks” who crowded to the dressing room, joking with them, smiling, kissing, and making love. “Love the One You’re With” was the theme of the day. If he was given to melancholy from time to time, it was because several decades later, the smartphone became ubiquitous. Suddenly, everyone had their nose in these things, and their ears sealed to ear buds. Yes, they brought a lot of great advantages, but constantly being psychologically connected to an information stream, social or not, wasn’t the same as watching, hearing, smelling the world. On the good side, you could study people, since they mostly weren’t looking. He remembered all the buzz of the latest phones and how that market was pumped up to strengthen the economic divide. There was a social divide, too, with some coveting the latest model while others struggled to compose a 280-character text message or send an email. A brief flurry of absurdly expensive eyeglass-sized cameras and heads-up displays followed, but these caused more trouble than they were worth. Phones gave way to cumbersome, ugly augmented and virtual reality masks of the mid 2020’s, and

finally today, the technology was all contained in contact lenses, surgically cloned to the eyes. They could see in the dark, and served as a high definition screen for information and entertainment. They even kept people healthy weight by monitoring vital signs, calorie intake and exercise. They could diagnose disease, and connect to help cure it. The computing engine was in one or more dental implants. If a lot of data began passing through the lenses in either direction, the CPU implants, placed where wisdom teeth once were, would heat up. Everyone looked great these days, but the human interaction of the older times was no more. No more live music, no more fans or jam sessions. People didn't even drink together. Why drink when that feeling came over the network, cheaper and without hangovers? Just as religion went out of style for the masses, an opium of the people was born in this constant connectivity. Those seeds were sown during the smartphone decades. Even conception was done via machines and networks half the time, since it was far more controllable with predictable results, thanks to gene editing. Raph loved all of it, even some of the technology, but more the lack of disease, the physical beauty of nearly everyone you met on the street... except that was starting to thin out. Even he stayed inside way too long. The implants kept people from obstacles while they watched and listened to an endless stream of entertainment. The few people in the streets were like beautiful zombies, they saw and heard nothing of the real world. They moved like the autonomous vehicles they were. Physical goods were mechanically delivered. Everything else came over the network, peer-to-peer, sex, drugs and rock and roll. Shit, did anyone even know that old expression? The constant glut of everything, food, art, sex, devalued the experience, but you always went back for more. Not only was the first one free, it was all free. What a brilliant way to allow the power hungry and their brokers to continue to play ego games with no interference from the masses. To escape these negative

thoughts, he decided to call up an old movie, sunk into the couch and closed his eyes as the opening scene begin playing directly to his optic nerve. That didn't overpower the memory of Switzerland and Dani all those years ago.

Zurich to L.A., 20th Century

In the final decade of the twentieth century, Raph traveled the world. He spent some years in Zurich, where he met Dani, who, after a year with him announced that she wanted a child. They both enjoyed, trusted and respected each other. She deactivated the contraception firmware and was pregnant with William not long afterwards. In 1997, with William still a toddler, the couple was separated after an incident Raph could never have imagined. Although they weren't in love, they didn't see other people by tacit agreement, or so he thought. Returning from a week in Paris on business, Raph got an email from a name he'd never seen. The email said that Dani was "a bitch who led me on". The person writing it claimed she had been in a libertine club in Geneva called "Le Chat Noir" several nights in a row, flirting with different men, and sometimes women and going home with some of them. It was apparent that this person was angry about not getting what he (was it a man?) wanted. Raph couldn't believe it. He expected that if Dani wanted other people, she would have just said so. True, she'd been acting a little strange since they'd had Billy. Just then, the light blue Volkswagen he'd given her for her birthday drove up. She walked in alone.

"Where's Billy?" he asked.

"He's been at Greta's all week." Greta was a girl friend of hers. He'd never thought of it before, but now he couldn't help wondering if they were lovers.

"Where have you been?"

He thought he saw her jerk her head slightly, a tic in her consciousness, before answering, "Geneva."

Then he saw her chin slightly tremble and her breathing became mechanical. "I'm so sorry", her voice cracked. "You don't deserve...", the words trailed off. He pressed himself against her, and began stroking her hair. He told her she didn't need to recount the details. Although the make-up sex was exciting, he was confused and frustrated. Dani still had tension lines on her face that usually disappeared after they made love.

All through their time together, her sexual appetite was in sync with his, but once in a while, she would interrupt whatever they were doing to insist on making love. She got a hungry look and the lines on her forehead became slightly visible. Her hair appeared shorter, as she'd pulled it back over the ears. He had to admit, there was nothing disagreeable about your mate suddenly touching you in an unambiguous gesture. One day, driving on the Interstate 5 between Fresno and Los Angeles, she made him pull over so they could go lie down on the wet, leaf-covered ground in the sketchy shade of the trees and go at it, barely hidden from the road. A few minutes later, he could see the California Highway Patrol car pull up behind theirs, the blue lights flashing.

They had to jump up and adjust their clothes and run to meet the patrolman. He could see the cop, looking at her wet jeans and his flushed face, knew what they were up to and didn't believe for a second his reason for parking illegally on the freeway. "The car overheated." He laughed inside thinking it wasn't the car that overheated, but Dani. More recently, she decided she had to have it in a busy underground parking garage. As exciting as the little moments were, it wasn't something he would instigate, preferring the comfort of home, or at least a hotel room, rather than standing up, she with her back against the building coming home at 2AM. This need of hers had grown stronger, and he became aware that it wasn't only sex she wanted, but the danger of discovery, or worse.

While he was away, she couldn't wait for his return, she had to go out to find partners, both male and female. This was a line that even she knew, shouldn't be crossed. Dani had desperately wanted a child. Pensri wanted nothing to do with it, and this harder "sister" personality, was taking over, little by little.

After an uncomfortable week, she said she wanted to leave for good and he saw no reason to oppose her decision. Some bridges can never be rebuilt. He had assumed she would want to leave with the child, but he wasn't sure that was legal. She made it obvious that she was in no mental state to deal. Sometimes, people make an exit like this, it used to be called "bailing", like "Fuck this, I'm gonna bail." She was in deep crisis mode, something he'd never seen in anyone before, and so this seemed like the right thing to do. He could raise the boy. She could come back when the Dani he knew did, to get to know the boy. They could be friends, if distant ones. It turned out she never got in touch. Possibly, Dani never came back.

Raph set about to arrange his life to raise his son. He knew some music people in L.A. and decided it was time to play again. He'd have plenty of time for the boy, who would benefit from exposure to music, too. After some initial scrambling, he and Billy found a pattern that worked for both of them. When Raph had a woman over, he didn't try to hide anything. Billy had never known his mother, and possibly never would. Billy grew up seeing several very "nice ladies" who came and slept with his dad. They were always kind and friendly to him. They would do things with him that dads weren't crazy about doing, like online clothes shopping. When they stayed overnight, they'd often do fun things like going to the park when Raph was playing. Although short term, these were quality relationships. Billy experienced life in a family of what the French called *à géométrie variable*, flexible.

The women Raph frequented were loving people who enjoyed life and treated Billy with love and respect. He grew into a handsome young man, confident and likeable.

Dani's and Raph's eyes were blue, but Billy, through some kind of cosmic joke, was dark of skin and eyes, "swarthy" some would say, but handsome. He could have been an Arab. He might have been Israeli, Armenian or even Italian. With those features, he was always the one to be pulled out of line to be searched or generally hassled. He was randomly asked for ID. On one occasion, a female cop asked Billy for his papers, took one look at those eyes, and said "Buy me dinner", which he did. They married a few months later, and Carol had Noah the next year. The genetic soup that made Noah was beautiful to behold. He would have fine features and a smile that could charm anyone. He was of light-skin, but noticeably mixed-race, which was an advantage in California. He was a born diplomat. His parents were very proud. Then came the pandemic of 2019. The world was told to stay at home. The year 2020 dragged on everywhere while life online became a reality. One of the few good things to come of that period was the realization that drinking water, food, electricity, and world networks needed to be treated as utilities and guaranteed to all inhabitants.

Whatever foreign enemy Billy was perceived as the night of his twenty-first birthday, he was gunned down like thousands of other "off-whites" in a Los Angeles street. Security footage showed a masked face in a black hoodie. This became a common unsolved crime during the waves of street shootings that followed during the two terms of the first openly racist American president. Billy's wife Carol never remarried. She was beautiful, Black and shot dead during the riots of 2025. Raph moved to San Francisco then, more at peace in those former techno-centers, to raise Noah,

then just 5 years old, as his own. Ironically, Raph had never planned on having kids. In fact, he had his vasectomy temporarily reversed to have Billy at the request of Dani.

Raph remembered hearing a story about a former co-worker he didn't particularly like. The man's wife had shot herself after their divorce. Twenty years later, their son shot himself with the same gun. "No man should ever have to survive his kid", he told the guy who related the story. At the same time, he asked, "Why the fuck did they keep that gun? I would have had it melted down or something!" Not that Raph would ever keep a gun in the house, anyway, because if you had one, it would somehow eventually be used, by you or someone else, possibly on you.

After the shock and sorrow of Billy's and then Carol's violent deaths, Noah was a bright spot in Raph's existence, a joy to be around. The boy was bright, always upbeat, respectful of everyone, even as a teen, and he took care of himself well. The strong bond between the two never wavered. Noah wasn't a typical teenager, not to Raph, anyway.

Waking out of the long reverie, he swore he'd get Noah out of that Ukiah suspended animation prison as soon as possible. At least there was no danger of violence there, just the years lost. Noah had no way of knowing what was happening to him.

Bangkok (Snake on a Plane)

The next lead to follow was obviously the “Asian connection”. It took three days to raise the credits needed to take a shuttle over to Thailand. He’d use the 4 hours in the slip to bone up on Bangkok and the hacker culture. Snake knew how to use his looks. His charm was one of his most valuable talents. He had no problem finding Pensri’s apartment, oddly enough, in the Arab quarter where rich Saudi tourists went slumming. Snake saw a pharmacy that had a sign in Arabic showing a prophElektric held with both hands by a young Asian girl. He set his tattoo to glow a sexy amber and went in. He smiled and asked the young Thai woman at the counter where the nearest e-Node was. Since Pensri didn’t answer her door, he figured she’d be at the local hacker hangout. She wasn’t there, and most of the people were hooked up to VSR equipment and bore the hideous masks of what was probably extreme pleasure, which, to the observer, looks similar to pain. It was an assortment of wrinkled noses, mouths gaping open, lips being licked, a kind of cyber version of the Agony and the Ecstasy. Thinking about this for a second, he decided to go back and try to let himself in to her place and look around. It wasn’t a decision he took lightly. He knew about the effects of making snap judgements. Years back, Snake had a female partner, the closest he’d come to love in his life. Julia was ginger with freckles, something that didn’t go over big time in Chicago. Blacks were supposed to keep the community pure by not interbreeding. Snake had no use for such limits. Julia had the bad habit of crossing the street at crosswalks rather than controlled intersections. Auto drivers would faultlessly stop for anyone or anything crossing. One day she made that call and was instantly crushed by one of these jackasses who insist on manually driving a big car. He was getting a blowjob at the time and didn’t see the AI warning him

about a pedestrian at the side of the road. The AI controller didn't brake the car when it was under manual, under the assumption that a driver was in control. Julia engaged in the crosswalk, assuming a vehicle would stop. Her life was abruptly taken by another person. The driver lost 5 years of his life for reckless endangerment and would never get a manual drive license again. Snake lost the only woman he had feelings for.

It was easy to break the ineffectual little lock that held the door shut. Her most valuable properties couldn't be stolen, anyway. Dark and quiet. He remained motionless for a few seconds until his contacts adjusted, compensating for the lack of light. Now he could see the place, a single room, had been tossed. Caution swept over him, not fear. You don't want fear to shift the adrenaline, that's when fatal mistakes happen. Now he saw the couch and the motionless androgynous body shape lying on it. Slowly, he made his way close enough to see whether there was still life in whoever it was. He bent over the prostrate figure and reached his hand to the throat, to see if there was a pulse. The lights came on full, causing a flash to his contacts and nervous system while he felt his arms pinned to his sides. The form moved now, he saw, and it said, "Who the fuck are you?"

Los Angeles to SoNapa

On Anajah's advice and guidance, Tamara made an appointment to see a memory specialist up in SoNapa. The tube ride from Los Angeles took about 45 minutes, which she spent in a panic, trying to mentally sort and survey her memories to see how extensive the damage was. It was a horrible feeling that things were getting worse. When she arrived at Dr. Hu's office, she was shown in immediately. Huu was jovial as a man might be when he has a name that gave leave to so many possible jokes. "Doctor Who?" "You have an appointment with who?" He explained to her that he was going to a scan, during which he'd ask her provocative questions in order to see different areas of the brain accessing memory. As an example, he said: "I'll ask you things like on what day of the week did you last masturbate?" Sex was not taboo, but even close friends didn't ask that out of nowhere. Fifteen minutes later he gave her his diagnosis, cautioning her that they'd need to do another session next week and compare the two results. He informed her that his estimate was that she was getting about 85% of her true memory. The loss was definitely being caused by nerve interaction. Then he said something in his affable manner that changed her mood considerably. He told her about a case he'd read about. A gifted musician had significant brain surgery after an aneurysm. Although he physically recovered with a large chunk of brain tissue removed, he had no memory of music or how to play it. He didn't know his name or recognize his family. He made an astonishing recovery in a few years and doctors were puzzled. With current knowledge of the brain, much more was possible. "With concentrated exercise, I think we can stabilize the loss and distortion while we find a way to reverse it. See you next week."

Bangkok

Once she got Snake's credentials from his tattoo, signed by Raphael Klein, Pensri released him from the mechanical body gripper and explained why she'd played dead and had a trap setup. Someone had come in and ransacked her apartment, a rather generous word for the hovel where she lived and hacked. As they didn't get what they were looking for, she knew they'd be back when she was there. While she was studying this amazing-looking dude, wondering where he was staying in town, they exchanged the information they had. Meanwhile, Snake could see she didn't know much, but it was also obvious that she hadn't known anything at all about the deal that would put her grandson away for years. While they chatted, Snake told her about the times he had been in prison, both before and after the current mind-fuck system. Before, you had to watch your back all the time. Form relationships, partnerships, while avoiding the wrong "party" or gang. Now, he explained, you just went to sleep confused and woke up confused some time later. He asked her what she was doing for the next meal. She gestured to something that looked like tandoori chicken thighs packed in a Vacuglass on the counter. "Organic rattlesnake-flavored lupin seed protein in ersatz Indian sauce", she mumbled, embarrassed. "You know this country still has real food, right?" he smiled. He regretted that where he lived, it was nearly nonexistent. They went out on Phayathai Road to a place he'd spotted in the taxi on the way to her neighborhood. Once he'd convinced the driver he was not going to buy jewelry or have shirts made, the dude had been an excellent guide. They bought fresh pineapple, cut while they waited and put on sticks, and some kind of Thai red curry dish that Snake thought he might regret the next day, and the largest bottle of beer he'd ever seen.

Snake could generally read women — and men for that matter — seeing how they saw him, sexually. She was probably twice his age, but when she fell out of her asexual bag, she was looking interested.

“Call me Dani”, she said, softly.

According to her body language, she was into him. That made her look female, and surprisingly attractive. He couldn’t remember ever seeing a light-skinned woman looking so enchantingly sexy.

Between two consenting adults in good physical shape, what was age but a theoretical concept? Was it ethical to mess with the grandmother of the guy he was hired to get released from prison, ex-partner of his new friend, Raph? Did ethics matter tonight? He made a decision, one he would both regret and be thankful for in the years to come: He’d pass this time but maybe there would be another day.

“I want to show you something”, she said, “come over here.”

The next day, Snake had to get to a banking node to get reward credits moved to a local tempaccount, in order to buy street food and other treats from the cash-like economy locals. When he opened the door to leave, Pensri was still asleep in her bed in a blue silk robe. The financial chore done, he stopped for some tamarind candy to bring as a treat for her, and went back to her place. He knocked on the door with an agreed pattern. The lock recognized him and let him in. Pensri was lying on the couch, motionless, just like the first time he saw her. This time, though, she was naked. Her eyes were closed. She was looking beautifully peaceful and innocent, but something in her position was unnatural. He saw her immobilizer body trap, smashed to pieces on the floor. He stood still and listened and he could see now she was not breathing. Apparently, her attacker was not known to her.

Carefully looking around the small space, satisfied the attacker was no longer there, he came closer. He saw bruises on her breasts and thighs. No, worse than bruises, torn flesh, sexual violence. He knew even before he touched her throat for a pulse, she was gone. This would be the last time Dani would appear. In this dump, given the disinterest of local police in a person of her lifestyle, there would be only a symbolic investigation. If he reported it, he would likely be charged and summarily convicted. He found some gloves in the kitchen alcove, snapped them on, and walked back to the couch. He looked at her face. It was restful, innocent like a sleeping baby's face. There was no sign of the hard hacker chick she had been. No violence was apparent, around the head or neck. Snake's examination of the body was painful. It was like the time he had to treat a 9-year-old girl, a rape victim. No one would have guessed from his current lifestyle that Snake had been an ambulance medic, years ago. He felt sorry now that he had decided against doing anything sexual with Pensri. That would have been a new experience for Snake, since he had never had sex with anyone this old and exotic. On the other hand, and he felt embarrassed to be feeling relief, since should there ever be an actual investigation, his DNA wouldn't be anywhere on the body. They hadn't touched. After he was initially caught in her trap that first day, she'd re-sterilized it in order to be able to identify a new intruder. He put her robe on her body, arranging it in a credible manner. He found two small garbage containers, filling one with the parts of the broken trap and put anything he touched in the other. He also took along the thing she'd shown him last night. Seeing the photo of the man's family in the taxi, he gave the tamarind candy to the driver on the way to the airport.

Chicago

Anajah was relieved to see Snake again, especially since in-person visits were rare. He explained that he needed her to do some lab work on a sample he had. He didn't mention the death, thinking it best she never found out about that, if possible. She poured over the decoded datatraces and quickly saw the Bunge Institute was one of the endpoints. So Vasilii wasn't just drooling over her tits in the lab, he'd used her experience to fabricate a weaponized version of the nanobots! She had no idea what the pieces of metal were and knew better than to ask. A day later, she learned that the DNA on them was a dead end, no record of it in US or Mexican databases. She'd need to get into Asian data next. Meanwhile, the research work on the nanobots had been tricky. If the global Russian network found out about her sniffing around, she'd be dispatched quickly and quietly. Unable to obtain a nanobot sample, her theoretical work couldn't be proven. At this point she decided to see Tamara in person. "I'll see you in Los Angeles, Baby Girl!", the Snake avatar voice said in her head, delivering and reading his encrypted text. Snake decided it would be best to try to finish this thing together.

SoNapa, Tamara and Anajah

Anajah had ridden north with Tamara to see Doctor Hu, the neuroscientist working on a noninvasive method to extract a nanobot sample from Tamara. If that worked, Anajah could verify what she thought would be the solution to neutralizing the bots, and eventually extracting them all. Hu was highly motivated for his own reasons. When the two women showed up in his office, they saw he was alone, no patients, no receptionist. Hu explained that he had cracked a lot of the code, thanks to the help from a hacker acquaintance. With that knowledge, he'd be able to instruct a small group of the bots out of Tamara's neural network for reprogramming. "Today," he said. "Right now."

Anajah understood, but did not voice the thought that "a lot of the code" meant there was shit in there Hu hadn't understood. If there were traps set in that code, it could make things much worse. They'd have to gamble. She put on a brave face and tried to hide the extent of her fear. Tamara had mixed emotions but, faced with the future vision that plagued her dreams these past weeks, she had no reason to hesitate.

"Let's do this, then."

Tamara returned to Los Angeles while the research continued with Anajah and Hu, whose first name was Tian. As the week progressed, Anajah and Tian had become friendly. The work they were doing required long inactive periods as the biological process of extraction took many hours, sometimes a full day. They worked on recently demised cadavers, to prove the viability of the methods. Like Anajah, Tian Hu was exceptionally gifted for research, but he was also a personable, caring human being and so was able to treat patients with conditions where AI wasn't

appropriate. He was named after the rebellious hero of a centuries-old Chinese novel. The cycle of work and off-time led to friendship, but unlike the time spent with Vasiliy secretly ogling her, Anajah felt herself falling for Tian Hu. They became intimate, and with that came a new language, a rapport something like twins are said to have. The work progressed faster, because less discussion was needed, they spoke in shorthand, didn't need to assign or agree, it was all coming together. Now they needed Tamara for the final experiment. Just before that day, Anajah had an idea, a new benign use for the technology, one they were now in a position to test before Tamara was scheduled to come back. They set about this new project with equal passion and in just one night they had their proof. This was huge!

Los Angeles, Snake

Snake loved the irony of having not one job, but a dozen hats he could put on and take off. Back when people actually worked, he had done a lot of things. Detective work, paramedical, some Robin Hood style thievery, punishing powerful people who dragged the powerless through hell, and like most, some sex work. This current project he had was of particular interest to him. It involved taking one of the few menial, no-requirement jobs available in City Hall, machine overseer. Only a human could be trusted to sense when something was wrong in the machine hierarchy. Machines were so intelligent that sometimes they would correct a condition, and then cover it up as if it never happened. This was the new AI, almost human indeed. Overseers could circulate freely throughout the building, and as Snake did so, he mentally catalogued the few people who worked there. He wore his borderline criminal look which was coincidentally very successful with women attracted to bad guys. All business was conducted online, so humans were rare in public buildings. Only politicians and strategy management analysts were there, along with a few machine overseers. One of the women, an SMA, took a liking to Snake as she chatted with him. He had the bad dude look, but his conversation was surprisingly intelligent and diverse. After a few weeks, the inevitable happened.

“Hey Alicia! ¿Que pasa?”, Snake smiled.

“Estoy un poco cansado, necesito relajarme”, she replied. Then she asked if he’d care to come over and relax with her for a few hours. He’d been waiting for this moment for a week after the first contact. He had to play this critical juncture just right, not cross any lines. There was only going to be one chance. Was she thinking sex, or just company?

The first thing he thought as they entered her place, was how powerful she must be. Most people, even those higher up in the MexFed were honest people who lived fairly modestly, although they wanted for nothing. Better food, better crib, sure, but this was beyond that level. She excused herself and told him to make himself at home. One of the luxuries of power was real food and real alcohol. Only the masses used electrical signals to get high and packaged food. Alicia came out in a diaphanous dress that must have been designed for the soft lighting of the place. She waved a hand and a wall rolled back to reveal a bar with items Snake hadn't seen anywhere. He recognized the rarest alcoholic drinks: aged Cognac, and Romanian wine in old style labeled bottles and snacks like almonds, which were practically illegal because of the amount of water needed to grow and harvest them.

"Trust me", she said, indicating the glasses. Now, in private, they spoke English, and she had a charming accent.

"Sure!" he replied, alarm bells going off in his head.

They toasted nothing in particular, drank their drinks. A few minutes into the second one, Snake noticed an anomaly in his sensory system, as it blurred and then went dark. He lost consciousness. When he regained it, his hands were tied to the foot of the bed, feet towards the wall. Alicia was nowhere to be seen. It was cold, and he realized she had removed his clothes.

Elsewhere, Tamara and Anajah were chilling at the apartment.

"Hu do you love?" Tamara joked. She was in a different world now, with a future and a clear past, not that the two geniuses had neutralized the StingerBots. Every moment was a precious celebration after the threat of oblivion and living in a fog was vanquished and removed. She asked more seriously, "You going back to live up there, or what, girl?"

Anajah would be giving up the direction of her lab to be a partner with Tian Hu in his work, part research, part practice. “I’ve had a chance to see what it’s like to work with him and be lovers. It’s amazing, we can be in different areas of the building all day without talking and feel each other’s presence. I think that is a component of love. Or is it just a symptom?” They both laughed at this. Living in NorCal did have advantages over Chicago. And with the new parallel business opportunity she and Tian had developed, life would be more than just satisfying, it would be exciting. They might just change the world, too.

Across town, Snake was testing the strength of the nylon ties constraining his hands and legs. Calm reasoning was required here, panic would be his nemesis. Vision back to normal, he looked around, taking in his surroundings. He heard a voice behind him say, “You are a naughty boy, aren’t you?” It continued, “You thought it would be easy to take advantage of an innocent girl like me, didn’t you?”

“Girl?”, he thought, “By any sense of the word, she was no—”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to teach you a lesson. One you won’t forget. If you survive, that is.”

There was something off here, as if she was playing a part, reading a script. He couldn’t see if she had a weapon or if someone else might be with her to handle him, now that he was safely trapped. Snake struggled to not allow fear to take over completely as she emerged from behind him.

Los Angeles, Tamara's Apartment

Tamara opened her door to a gap-toothed smiling, amazing looking dude.

"You must be Snake?" she said, head cocked in fake inquiry.

"And I guess you are Doctor Who!" he joked. In previous communication, they both had avatars that were caricatures of their real appearances. They all sat down, and Snake began to recount his "job experience" up to the part where he woke up naked and bound to the bed.

Anajah smiled. "So you thought it was the end."

"I did. But her little reverse rape scenario was perfect, I didn't even have to break a sweat. She jumped on the bed, straddled me, I just lay there and let nature take its course after a little help from her. I was so relieved it didn't take long, either. What a relief!"

Tamara, who had experienced Stingers, now chimed in, "How was the sex?"

"Once I got over the idea she wasn't going to cut off my junk and let me bleed to death, it was the best ever, not because of her, but because I didn't expect to die moments after. And the ending was more than happy, it was—uh..."

"I know. Just before your entire life is stolen from you, you get the best orgasm known to woman—or man, I've heard."

Alicia, with a dose of her own medicine, was in prison. Once she'd been injected with the StingerBots, she was forced to admit to the entire plot. She had no choice. She couldn't flee, she had

nowhere to go. The StingerBots would gradually erase her entire life. Trying to punish Tamara for refusing her love, manipulating the treaty agreement process in favor of one of the power brokers, which was how she maintained an artificially-high life style, like one of them.

Tamara asked, “So she did not have anything to do with that Thai hacker’s murder?”

Snake replied, “According to some of the stuff I brought back from her Bangkok hovel, the previous year, Pensri was spending a lot time in weird virtual sex bars. She teased and mocked one of the creepsters who was a denizen of those areas. They really went at each other online. My theory is that the psycho eventually tracked her down, brutally raped and murdered her as he had other victims. When he began disfiguring her with a knife he discovered the truth and it must have made him even more furious.” The few fatal crimes of the age were always crimes of passion (or psychos), and were hard to solve because of their random nature. Society had found solutions for most physical ailments and accidents. Stem cells were how teeth, organs and limbs were regrown, but the nanobot technology that changed the way neutrons communicated was still in its infancy. It was easy to use it for nefarious purposes because the risk of doing damage was not a concern. It took time to tame it for more useful things, like better orgasms, memory repair, and some day, hopefully, fixing broken minds, like the one responsible for Pensri’s destruction.

Anajah looked at Snake with obvious admiration, and said:

“You figured right. The DNA was from a local sex offender who had a record for assault. Pensri was strong, she probably fought back and got offed for her trouble.”

“When I saw her lying there, she looked like a peaceful Asian

woman of around fifty, at rest”, Snake said.

“Let’s talk about why the three of us are all here today”, said Anajah. “I want you two to join me in a new venture, one that may just change humanity’s social path.”

The first step was obtaining Noah’s quick release, his sentence reversed. That also meant he’d be compensated for the months he’d lost. The prison tech offered to restore his memory just up to the incident that inculpated him, but as that was the night with Tamara, he refused, requesting instead that it ends just before the police arrived at his home. He might as well benefit from all the emotions he’d felt.

Los Angeles to Old Mexico

By 2030, Mexico's economy was stronger than that of France or the UK. After the war with the US in 2039, the Mexican economy grew quicker than the other top 10 countries. Literacy was higher there in both than the average in the remaining United States of America. It was natural to build a new business in Mexico. In 2051, Mexico was neck and neck with China on the world stage.

‘StingerBots’ was hardly going to be a way to communicate the vibe around them, so the name ‘Sparklers’ was born. The latest Sparkler Bar opened in Acapulco, and the four friends who had created the concept were celebrating. Noah was there, digging his grandfather playing music again with his centenarian buddies. The musicians still argued like old married couples. The pendulum had finally swung back, live improvised music became a thing, just as it had been when he'd started playing in the 1970's. For decades after the pandemic of 2020, life was more online and less in person. When the word travels around on The Wire, it gets around very quickly. Everyone wanted to try Sex Sparklers. It was said to be much better than any online experience, despite the fact that hackers had successfully simulated its effect electronically. Sparklers could be only absorbed orally and had a single notable effect, that of magnifying and prolonging orgasmic sensation for at least two minutes for both partners. Those two minutes felt like 10. Anajah and Hu realized that by simply removing the nefarious element in the Stinger nanobots by reprogramming, they could be cheaply produced and would be welcomed by most of the human race, barring the infinitesimal band of religious zealots. Most “people of faith” had evolved, ironic term if ever there was one, to a life of sharing their beliefs only amongst themselves and thus could function normally in society. They learned to honor the

teachings to the point of not judging or condemning the behavior of others who didn't share their views.

Sparkler Bars flourished, people flocked to them to experience this magic feeling. Every city bid for them. The sexual sharing economy was born, taking humanity to another level.

From Earth's Upper Atmosphere

When the first alien ship landed, they found a happy and fit population on a planet mostly recovered from successive waves of global warming, pandemics, water shortage and war. They had their work cut out for them.

The Turnaround

Chapter One

As I got in the train, a group of about 15 people were swarming around my window seat babbling away. If you've experienced this, you are familiar with the mantra playing in your head: "Please, not next to me, please..." so it was with tears of joy that I saw a very pleasant-looking young woman with a huge backpack started putting her stuff down on the vacant seat with a "hello". "Hey" I said, knowing immediately she spoke English, not French, "Need help with that?"

"If you can", she said. Was I that feeble looking? Thus began a short but deep friendship during the fastest three and a half hour train ride I ever made. After a while, I asked if she'd be willing to take a selfie with me, and we both did on our respective phones. We exchanged fluids within minutes of meeting. Hers was thick and rich, mine thin and tasteless. She traded me a yogurt for a bottle of water. "Sealed." I told her, "Never accept one that isn't". She laughed at this. I soon found out why. After I ate the yogurt she'd opened, handing it to me with a smile, I found myself quickly asleep and woke up to find the train pulling in to my destination station, Paris Montparnasse. I was thinking, "Wait, you think she did it on purpose?" She was gone and so was my backpack. Funny thing is, the train had no stops between the time I met her and when we arrived at my station.

Had I imagined the entire episode? Where was my pack? After looking around the empty car, I got off the train and a man motioned to me, pointing to my backpack on the ground. I thanked him, but he replied in a language I couldn't identify. No chance,

then, to ask about what he knew. The batteries of my phone and tablet were fully charged and my wallet had 300 euros more than it did when I last looked. An envelope was in the zippered compartment of the pack. I decided to wait and look after I got home, as I had to run for the crowded tram pulling in.

Chapter Two

On the way home, I pondered what had happened and tried to understand why. The most obvious theory was that she didn't want to talk, whereas I was enthralled with talking to her. Not just talking at her, but listening to her story. Each of us touched on some personal things. At first glance, I guessed her to be just under thirty, but as I watched her poise in speaking to the complete stranger I was, I knew she was older. Also, her Asian origin made it difficult to gauge some things about her in the way you would your own "people": accent, grammar, expressions, even general health. But why had she gone through my things, recharged my tablet battery and put an additional few hundred euros in my wallet? This made no sense at all.

When I arrived home, there were messages about things that needed sorting even before unpacking, which consisted of dumping my backpack's content on the bedroom floor, emptying the pockets, and leaving it all lying around for days. When I did get to that, much later in the day, I found the envelope she'd put there.

It smelled of something unfamiliar. Nothing like perfume, more like a spice I didn't recognize. I knew from our discussion that she was Thai, and began wondering if this was something to do with cooking, since I love Thai food, but it wasn't anything I recognized. The envelope was not sealed, it was folded shut, so I opened the flap to find two items. No note, just a key and a business card with the name of a bank on Silom Rd. Bangkok! The key would be to something like a safe deposit box. The card had no name on it. As intriguing as all this was, I had things to do. Taking off to Thailand, although an attractive idea, was not one of them, until I got an email, two weeks later, that put me on a Paris-Bangkok flight.

Chapter Three

Jet lag had me up at dawn looking at the sunrise behind the Bangkok skyline.

The first thing I thought of was the message I had received two weeks after I had the unusual meeting on the train. It was in perfectly readable, if oddly-phrased English:

“I regret to have made your sleep, but I had to check my impression of you with the reality. You have no memory of our discussion, but I know now that I can trust you, that the connection we made was good. I looked at things on your tablet, searching for untoward or marginal. You should use a better shape to protect that Nexus, Z was the first one I tried. I am sorry for invasion, but when you understand my situation, you will forgive. Come to the bank with key at 2 PM next Monday. Attached is ticket and prepaid hotel reservation. I left all the money I could in your bag. If you decide to come, I know I was right. If not, thank you for giving me hope.”

It was signed without salutation, “Pensri”. Perhaps I should have made it clear from the beginning of this crazy adventure that there was no sexual component to this relationship. Even the word “friend” seems inappropriate for someone you meet by chance and about whom you know less than you do about your online contacts (“friends!”) on a social network. It was no surprise then, that there no “Regards” or other salutation, as we were already past that stage without ever actually having been there. It would seem that though I was not a friend, I had become her “follower”, literally — and where would this lead?

One of the greatest luxuries to the modern traveller is the

advent of strong, temperature-stable hot water in the bathroom. After a miserable night of tossing and turning, getting up to turn off the AC, getting up again to turn it back on when the sheets were drenched with sweat, the shower was heaven. I rarely stand for any length in a shower at home, but I needed this. Breakfast was not going to happen for another hour, so I looked at the magazines and directories advertising bars and lounges. The bedside phone made me jump. I expected it to be her, but it was a man's voice with a slight but unidentifiable accent.

“You have made a large mistake, but you leave now, nothing regrettable will happen to you.” A click, a buzz, then dial tone and static.

I spent most of the hour trying to pretend the short call was a wrong room number, but when I went down to breakfast, the receptionist beckoned me over to the counter and handed me a note which had the same message, but this one began with my name. So, not an erroneous room number. Almost everyone in the breakfast room appeared to be from the Middle East. I was trying to discretely check out all the men, wondering if the call was from one of them. No clue was to be found amongst the largely unsmiling rattlers of dishes and spoons.

When I walked outside, I found out the hotel was in an Arabic tourist quarter. There were a lot of stores catering to them. This was more interesting than being in, say, an American tourist area, or even a European one. Although I dealt with people from the Maghreb almost daily in Paris, I had never seen rich Saudis on vacation with their families. Leaving that area, I began noticing the amount of street vendors with food of all kinds. Delicious fresh pineapples they would slice for you and exotic fruits like the sweet and sour tamarinds. There were still a few hours I needed to fill, so I caught a rickshaw over to a large temple on the map and walked around. I almost started feeling normal, but then

remembered the mystery and the menacing phone call, and started looking over my shoulder and all around, suspicious I may have been followed. My only time piece was my phone, and the only use for the phone was also for the time. Since a quick look at a map cost several euros on unmitigated roaming, I wasn't turning data on except in an emergency. Other than the hotel, wifi was rare and did I want to be on public wifi, anyway? Finally, it was time for my appointment at the bank.

Bangkok traffic is always slow, so it was a good thing I gave myself over an hour to get there. I ended up walking the last few kilometers at a faster speed than traffic was moving. I entered the large bank building and realized I had no idea who to ask for or where to go. Armed guards were eyeing me from every part of the lobby. A hand or two were nervously worrying the leather of the holsters they wore. Land of Smiles? A woman in a business suit came toward me, the picture of authority and confidence. By the gait, I would say she was in her late 50's, but again, so hard to judge. Maybe she was 60? As she got close, I realized it was Pensri, except no, Pensri was surely twenty years younger than this woman, who was probably a relative.

"I am glad you could come. My... daughter has done some crazy things, but I think she was right to choose you on this occasion. Welcome to Thailand."

Chapter Four

She motioned to a couch and said “Wait here. My assistant will come to collect you shortly.” I was expecting a woman, but the assistant reminded me of a Tunisian work friend in Paris. Mohammed was big, tall and had a large, roundish shaven head. Tunisians have a softness about them, a gentle disposition and way of speaking that often gives them away. He took me into a conference room that had the biggest video screen I’ve ever seen indoors. It had what looked like a very high definition photo of the moon on it. Sitting around the table were about eight men in suits, with the woman who greeted me sitting at the head. She stood, nodded to me and “Mohammed” an arm directing me to the other head of the table. He then began serving the food. The woman who was supposedly Pensri’s mother (what was that hesitation when she said that?) said “I think you will enjoy a red curry?” No one said a word after that. The curry was good, but hotter than I generally made, but how did she know I like red Thai curry? She must have been reading my posts, because I wrote a few weeks before about a store I found that sold it. Faced with this strange hospitality, I couldn’t just blurt out “What am I doing here and why are people threatening me on the phone at 6 AM?” Even if I did, I knew the answer would be something like “All in good time.” After a long period of dining room noises of plates and glasses, the woman said,

“Do you know what Pensri’s name means?”

“Something to do with the Moon?”, I asked.

“And did you see a moon on the way here or before dawn?”

“No, the sky was clear, there was no moon.”

I’m sure she conducted the discussion this way by design,

drawing it out until I was ready to scream out my questions, when she said,

“I think we should go to deposit box and get what is in it so you can head north straight away. Before we go into details, we know you have received threatening messages from the scammers. You’ll have to take my word for the fact that they will be able to do nothing to you before, during, or after your work with us, should you accept it.”

Quite the anticlimax, the box. What else would anyone expect, other than a map of the north of Thailand with a clear destination marked on it and a huge number of bank notes, about 1,000,000 baht, around 25,000 euros or over \$30,000 worth of cash.

Mohammed was waiting at the wheel of a Mercedes G63 AMG when I came out of the hotel with my pack. He smiled at me as he got out to open the door, but I saw him sitting there a moment before he saw me with what can only be described as a worried look. As I got in, I recognized one of my favorite John Coltrane recordings, “*Spiritual*” from the album *Live at the Village Vanguard* playing. How could they know that? Again, the Internet never forgets, even if I had deleted those posts years ago.

“Relax, Monsieur, we are on for a long’aul. You like jazz, yes?” Five hours of very slow traffic to the northern region, was indeed a “long haul”, even if punctuated by discussions of Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Joe Henderson and a few other saxophonists. Again, who are these people and how long have they been tracking me? I dozed on and off. The only thing I noticed that seemed out of place was a small tear in the roof near my door. When awake, I watched the green scenery floating by. I had lived in Paris for over 20 years, and the population pressure there is high. Silence is rare. Outside, ambulance, police and fire truck sirens are common at all times of the day. Indoors, elevators

and people walking in the stairs and halls of apartment buildings are heard most of the day and well into the night. But Paris is calm and pastoral compared to Bangkok, where there are three or four times as many people living, and they all seem to be out driving or walking on the street at any given time! Only 48 hours earlier, I was lounging in my Paris abode laughing at a Chevy Chase movie about American tourists in Paris. Now I was appreciating the beauty of the countryside. We stopped at a family-owned restaurant in the middle of nowhere and had one of the best meals I can ever recall eating. Mo paid and we continued on our way to *je ne sais où*. Even the French pronunciation “Moe-ah-med” got to be too much and I asked if I could call him “Mo”, which he accepted with resignation. Mo then began asking me about wine, what I knew about it, who I knew and what I had done in the wine world.

“You worked with a few of the most famous names in French wine, but do you know anyone in Thailand’s wine business?”

Once again, the disconcerting deep knowledge of my past activities came out. Since they obviously knew more about me than some of my tech acquaintances, I confirmed that the French wine business was special. Producers felt a passion for the wine they made, and marketing would often be left to consultants. My company didn’t hire young interns to do social media, we did it ourselves, in perfect, idiomatic English and with the reasonable use of emoticons, the abuse of which are a dead giveaway. Everything we did was done as if we owned the brand ourselves. It’s why our client relationships lasted so long and why we were often given the green light without stockholder meetings and formalities. While I checked off the questions Mo was asking, we were passing near Khao Yai National Park. Shortly after that, the car pulled into a place I had no idea even existed in Thailand: a breathtakingly beautiful winery. Standing near the reception area,

among a dozen visitors was “beauty of the moon” herself, Pensri. Recognizing the SUV, she smiled, and I hoped the smile was for me, not Mo. I could just make out the sliver of moon behind her over the vineyards.

Chapter Five

Mo nodded goodbye and turned the SUV around at the end of the long driveway, after leaving my pack with someone who came out of the bungalow there. As we walked down there, Pensri started to tell me the story I had been waiting three days to hear.

“As you’ll see”, she began, “it is completely black at night here in the vineyard, except when the moon is out and a quarter or more full. I’ve walked the vineyards in this region for ten years, and I don’t even use a light when I walk back to the guest house. One night I saw the shadows of three people in the feeble starlight. Two were men, carrying a case of wine. The third, a woman, had two glasses, and a container of some kind I couldn’t identify. You met the woman yesterday at the bank. She likes to say she’s my mother, but in fact we only met last year. My parents are actually both deceased. Her name is also Pensri. Not by coincidence, though. She is me 22 years from now, and apparently, I developed a macabre sense of humor.”

Then she laughed, a kind of girlish giggle I can only recall hearing on one other occasion, one which modesty forbids me from relating in detail. I felt a chill then, and another feeling I’d rather not describe. A wave of *déjà vu* came over me, as if I’d been in this place before. The train wasn’t the first time I met Pensri at all. I met her in Zurich on a blues tour. I was 27 and she was... I hope 18. I was intensely embarrassed and hoped she hadn’t noticed my reaction to that little laugh, as she’d kept talking and we now were standing at the open door of the guest house. Memories came rushing back to me, I felt like I was drowning in them. It was getting dark. She showed me where there was food and drink in a tiny cooler. I was tired, but not hungry. She kissed me on both cheeks (one, two, three times which is just weird) and said good night. I took a look outside, but all I could make out was

the two hills at the far end of the vineyard where there were no stars. I know it makes no sense, but the silence of the night was deafening in its intensity. Can darkness be blinding? The only entertainment was in my tired mind. It was running a tape of year 27 of my life and the series of encounters on that concert tour.

What I remembered of my short stay with Danni (aka an 18-year old Pensri) had a funny element to it. Because she worked in a huge hospital, she had a room there. She'd gone out to get beer or something. About an hour later, there was a loud knock at the door. Fearing some kind of illegality and having no German at my command to explain, I hid in a locker. The knock continued. After what seemed like about 15 minutes, I gave up, came out and opened the door. If it was the hospital admin or the *Polizei*, they'd have a key, right. It was Danni's friend Maurizio. She'd had a minor accident on her moped. Ironically, she was in another hospital. Maurizio took me on his moped to that place and I saw Danni. I had to leave town, but I promised her I'd be in touch. I did see her again in Geneva a year later, but that's another story. The last thing I remembered was Danni looking at me with a serious look and saying "We will meet again, you and me." I apparently misunderstood her to be saying something less literal.

Morning, light, far away sounds. I wondered how I would be able to deal with Pensri/Danni now that these inexplicable memories had surfaced, or whether they were imaginary. I still didn't know what I was doing here, only why it was me, not someone else. The door opened after two quiet knocks, and I heard a female voice saying,

"I told you we would meet again. How have you been?"

It was the 18-year old Danni. This time, nearly 50 years, not ten stood between us.

Chapter Six

Three women walk into a bar, but they are really only one.

Danni is 18 in corporeal terms, but she could be any age in actual being. My memories of her in Zurich and Geneva did not involve much talk. In fact, she spoke, or pretended to speak very little English in those days. Seeing her dark eyes mocking me now (“How have you been?” Really? after 40 years? She’s 18 and I could be her grandfather!)

“Don’t worry, I’ve just come to get you. The older me will be doing the explaining in the restaurant over breakfast. Come.”

As much as I wanted to make a smart remark, it felt too weird with the age difference. I could joke with the 60-ish woman, maybe. I wondered, would I see these three together at once? That made sense in no universe I’d ever read about, but this wasn’t sci-fi, it was real life, whatever that means.

The girl I knew as Danni delivered me to a large terrace that looked out on the vineyards. In the cool of the morning it was a beautiful setting. Food was set out on a table for two and I was seated by a server in white, who brought me juice, tea and a plate of fresh fruit. The 40-year old Pensri appeared, and came to sit across from me. What she said next didn’t surprise me as much as I thought it would.

“We, and that really means ‘I’, have known you since you were a young man. The key word there is young, by the way.” I blushed.

“I’ve followed you through all of the iterations of your social life. Music you’ve written and performed, jobs you’ve held, the Internet when that happened, and then my non-random meeting with you on the train in France. One of us observed your life in

Los Angeles and Mill Valley. What I'm about to tell you will seem crazy, but because I know one of your favorite authors is Robert Silverberg, you will immediately get it. Thailand is far from the wine-trading capitals of the world, so it was chosen as a place where authentic vintage wines could be transported through time, to the future where they would fetch an indecent profit, while passing any possible chemical authenticity test. In 1961, or even 1989, they didn't use things like holograms to authenticate wines. The value of a 1989 Château Haut-Brion might be over 2,000 euros today, but when it came out in 1990, it could be acquired for a mere 250 French francs. A 12-bottle case of that wine might fetch the equivalent of \$30,000 at auction today. It could be bought and transported through time for almost nothing."

I was still wondering about why there were three versions of one woman. I asked,

"So, you guys, your family or whatever you call yourselves are dealing in real wine from the past?"

I wasn't even sure this was technically illegal. Was it? She laughed that funny, adolescent laugh that turned me on a little, and said,

"Not really ('you fool', she might have added with her eyes). We are the equivalent of Silverberg's 'time patrol', we're here to make sure these things don't happen, because they may cause a tear in our temporal line and that could be fatal to your time and ours."

"And you dragged me into this web because...?"

"Because we know you, in every connotation of the word, and we trust you. If this backdoor into time were widely known, it would only be a matter of time before time hackers — yes, they exist and have existed for centuries — would be running a million

games on every front. Temporal chaos is a terrible prospect.”

I guess I am a typical male, because the wine investment scheme didn’t seem that important to me, whereas the three versions of one woman I had met twice (or more) over my lifetime was absolutely fascinating! The possibilities... She was reading my mind now, and said something to the effect of “In your dreams!”

“What exactly do you propose ‘we’ do about this?”

“We have a plan, and we’ll need the unique combination of your various interests and skills to see it through to completion. You can still play guitar, we’ve seen the stuff you’ve been posting. You can create social media accounts quickly and stealthily using proxies, and you have a following in some wine communities.”

I thought about this a second. I’m pretty burned out on wine communities. Wine is like sex. I like to drink wine, but I like to drink beer, too, and rum. I don’t like to talk about any of these things online anymore. If this was going to be some kind of sting operation, I might not be the ‘influencer’ they would need. Once more, she was ahead of me:

“Don’t forget, we can travel on timelines, and that includes yours. We will go back to the days when you were among the first Twitter users, before you worked for the big names. I saw a blog you wrote on Posterous about the arrival of wine on Twitter. You’re ideally placed to make this work with an initial setup in 1996 and on to 2006 and Twitter. The musician thing is good cover. Your style is eternal, it will always be relevant. No tapping before 1972, though. That would cause excessive attention.”

Me: “If I go back in time, will I still know then what I know now?”

Her: “Did you learn anything about sex and the female body in 1974 from a woman apparently 10 years younger than you were then?”

Me: “Touché”

Chapter Seven

The plan was pretty simple.

A timeline would be created and modified to entrap the... what? They were not counterfeiters, the wines were real, the vintage, authentic. There was a problem with them, nonetheless: A 1989 Château Haut-Brion today was released 24 years ago. If bought on the market as soon as it was available and somehow brought to 2014 for sale, it would not be mature. In fact, most would consider it undrinkable for years. Didn't the 2014 buyers of this wine ever try to drink it? They'd know immediately something was wrong. This says a lot about people who buy \$2k bottles of Bordeaux. They like to brag about them, show them as trophies, and often, they open them at a dinner with CEOs or other billionaires who don't know wine at all. I myself have brought many great bottles of wine to tech conferences. Not \$2k bottles, no, but \$500 bottles, yes. I take pleasure in giving my fellow tech enthusiasts a taste of wines they probably wouldn't ever know. Many hadn't ever tasted any wine. Having worked closely with producers, I have been able to get great wines at very reasonable prices. The telephony and IT people will remember that taste and if they really like it, they may even seek out good wines that are more affordable. And for those who just don't care for wine, at least they tried a very good one before deciding that wine wasn't their thing, as opposed to some plonk at a party.

As Pensri explained it to me, I would be sent to the places where the wine was for sale. The cash from the safe deposit box was to show around in order to participate in the cash sales. The time-traveling sellers always brought a few real bottles, the ones that had aged normally in a cellar, as "decoys". They would allow aficionados to taste the wine that had been aged 24 years. Then they would sell them a case that was so young it still was in bottle

shock. The buyer would pay up to \$25,000 for wines the seller purchased at about one-tenth that amount. I still had enough feel for the wine to know the difference between a wine that was 24 years old and one that had been bottled months earlier. I would taste the decoy. Then, I would demand they open one of the bottles from the case offered to prove it was the same wine. I'd have to be careful and examine the labels, which remember, were perfectly authentic, to see how the paper and ink had aged. Otherwise, there may have been an aged bottle planted in the case for just such a request. Once I determined which bottles were not aged, I would spread the word via my social media contacts. Those people had credibility and huge followings. They would then come, taste and expose the wines as "fakes".

The whole thing seemed crazy, but as I traveled between the points of confidential exchanges, we were able to foil the scheme within weeks. Once word got out, it was over, because the number of bottles in 1989 was small, as is the potential buyer's market. During our exposé, I had to change my appearance at each event and I would always have one of the women with me: Danni, the grand daughter I was trying to impress, Pensri, the daughter-in-law who was buying the wine as a gift for my son, or my wife, the older Pensri. The women were used to playing different roles, in fact they really were the same person. My fantasy of seeing all three at once would never happen. It was mesmerizing, though, to spend time with a woman at three different stages of her life within a week! A little like tasting the same vintage wine at different times in its "life".

Besides "tutoring" me, I never learned what Danni was doing in 1974 besides buffing hospital floors, but I was glad to see her again. I've wondered over the years how various people I met on the road were doing. You see, on the road, here one day, gone the next, you get pretty far into people in that one moment you spend

together. Were they still alive? Healthy? Free? Married, did they have kids?

Our last wine event was in Tokyo. We decided to have a last drink at the Skytree Tower. So, we were done, mission accomplished! I offered to give back the money I hadn't spent, but she/they refused to take it. It was time to discuss leaving to go back to my regular, ordinary, but comfortable life. Would they even let me go, knowing what I now knew? Sure, Pensri originally had said they trusted me, but what else were they up to, darting around in time in three different bodies?

"I think it's time for me to get back to Paris. If nothing else, I don't want the pipes to freeze in my apartment", I tried to joke to the Pensri who was my "contemporary", although that word now had little meaning. She reminded me that no time has passed since I left.

"Would you like to find out what all those people you met over a lifetime of travel to other places and times are up to? Did it not occur to you that this little gig was awfully easy, that anyone with a little wine knowledge could have done it? It was a test to see if you were time patrol material. If you want to join us, we will welcome you and you will travel as your 27, 47 and 67 year-old self. You will move freely between Asia, Europe and the United States, mostly doing surveillance and with plenty of free time to explore the morals and customs of each era."

"And if I choose not to join you?"

"Your memory will be erased, and you'll wake up in Paris with no recollection of any of it, except the train ride where my... daughter, my younger self selected you, sat down next to you, and charmed you into a long conversation.

The Coin of the Realm

In the mid 21st century, viral infection became a thing of the past.

January 1st, 2048 was a very special day for Rafael Mikael Rivera. It wasn't the New Year that made this day memorable, nor was it the fact that Rafael turned 100 on this date. It was the day that would change humanity, beginning in his country, the 45 United States of North America, and then, after a short distribution delay, the world!

Rafael's invention, *FitChip*, was ingenious, and it would put an end to influenza, HIV, hepatitis, Dengue fever, Ebola and all other virally-transmitted disease in a few short weeks. He got the idea at a farmers' market around 2015.

"I saw the clever mechanism they used to relieve the shortage of change in the form of dollar bills and coins." Rafael said in an interview with anchorwoman Tiffany Stark. (NB the dollar bill was part of the antiquated currency system of the time. At the markets, they used tokens to circulate as dollars and who ever had them at the end of the day redeemed them for true currency.)

Rafael's chance meeting with Dr. Dede Stagg in the 2020's produced more than mutual pleasure, for it also gave him a painful urinary tract infection. This was not mentioned in the interview, but Rafael would remember the burning for years to come, even as he became smitten with her. Dr. Stagg was on the verge of inventing a vaccine to stop all viral infections, but it worked through the skin and required daily contact to keep working. She hadn't yet found the proper way to effectively distribute the preventative daily dosage to the population. They could take daily injections, and opposition to vaccines in general would never die.

After a fiery few days, Rafael approached Stagg with a

proposition. Marriage was a part of it, but also a collaboration that would go down in history. They'd be "*more famous than Pierre and Marie Curie*", he told her. "*But not as famous as the Beatles*", she countered. And so it came to pass that FitChip was born. The drug companies tried to kill it, of course. Then they tried to buy it. Finally, they tried to get the formula and specifications from the NSA to no avail.

On January 1st, 2048, FitChip was approved for use and distribution began immediately. New FitChips were manufactured as soon as the approval became a given. They were distributed in place of the existing tokens and looked exactly like them, except for the likeness of a couple in lab coats on the heads side. Viral infection was a thing of the past, because FitChip was a human-designed virus that completely took over and monopolized the immune system. Distributed daily to the body, its updated cellware examined every potential entrant to the human body and blocked and killed any trace of malevolent organisms. The coins were widely called miraculous, and in the weeks that followed, little by little, the coughing, sneezing, headaches, burning, itching, loose bowels, constipation and destruction of tissue ceased. The general population was visibly happier and kinder to each other and Rafael's dream was coming true in his 101st year on Earth.

On June 21st, 2048, the longest day in the 45 United States of North America, the first evidence of hacked FitChip cellware was spotted, putting red eyes and an evil grin on the images of Rafael and Dede. Ironically, they were the first to die.

Cross Country Drive

As I pulled out of the gas station and onto the on ramp of Interstate 80, I didn't expect to ever see the passing red Alpha-Romeo again. They'd be getting much better mileage than my old Econoline which, these days, couldn't go much over 60.

When you're young, driving across 12 states in a beat up van makes you feel adult. There's a feeling of loneliness driving, especially at night on a freeway crossing an entire state that was home to only about a half million people. That's less than the city of Toledo, Ohio. The highway has a section called "The Highway to Heaven". In those days there was only AM radio in cars, and where we were, and by "we", I mean the van and I, there would only be sermons and talk radio. Traffic was light and other vehicles rare, except the occasional 12-wheeler. This road was so lonely, it was a pleasure to see the truckers signal that it was ok to get back in the right lane, once you passed them. I guess part of the adult feeling was the lack of entertainment other than watching carefully for deer. People didn't hitchhike on this deserted road and I'd hate to think of what would happen if you broke down. No cellphones in those days, and the call boxes were few and far between.

After a stop at the 101-pump gas station in Wyoming, I was set for fuel until just outside Salt Lake City. That's where I stopped in a motel for the night. It was an unusual place with only cottages and little winding paved paths that all led to the office and the food area. The food consisted on one blinking Coke machine and one mechanical monstrosity that had peanut butter crackers and Mars bars. That name has always struck me, why Mars? I imagined a kid in some podunk town, dreaming of the stars. The kid grew up and created a candy bar named after a planet. Or maybe he was a classical music fan or a Greek mythology geek

and was thinking of the god of war? Later, I learned it was just the guy's name, Forrest Edward Mars. I opted for the crackers and a soda and turned to take the winding path back to my cottage. A guy, much older than me, was coming from one of the cottages and we met on the way. He said hello, mentioned something about how lonely it is in the middle of nowhere and I agreed, neutrally. He then invited me to join him in his little place and I respectfully declined, thanking him. He then said something that has stayed with me all these years. It was a simple sentence, yet burned into my memory along with a million other inconsequential moments. He said, "Well, I guess I'll just go back to my room and jack off." What, I wonder, could I have possibly replied? Funny thing is, I don't remember. Nor did I really understand completely because homosexuality wasn't something people talked about nor was it in the news. I only understood this incident a few years later.

Next morning, content to have not met my interlocutor of the night before, I checked out and hit the road. Just after crossing into Nevada, I stopped for gas. I did a double take when I noticed a red Alpha-Romeo also filling up. I refueled, stocked up on the kind of junk food you found in gas stations, sometimes next to the soft porn magazines. After paying, I noticed the red Alpha was gone. I warmed up the engine, it was getting chilly, and headed back towards the interstate. You can see how boring such a long solo trip is, and how a minor detail can distract and entertain. Keeping track of the red car was a game to help stay awake, stay sane. I wasn't a huge fan of hitchhiking myself, in fact, never done it except in an emergency. I didn't generally pick people up, either, but at the freeway entrance was a girl. She was around my age and had an anodyne hippie look about her. I was into that and it just seemed like it wasn't going to be a problem, so I pulled over and told her to climb in. We stuck her bag in back, and introduced ourselves. I forgot her name, but when she heard mine, she giggled a little. When I asked why, she said "Don't you know

what the word randy means?”. I laughed but my face was probably redder than that little car. She explained that it was in common use in Britain. I’d never been to Europe. We chatted as strangers would and there was no sexual vibe there, more’s the pity, I thought. She asked me to leave her at Lovelock, so I exited the freeway, dropping her off at the entrance of the town as she’d asked. At this point, I wasn’t surprised to see the same red Alpha leaving the drugstore, headed towards the freeway.

Boring! A straight section of freeway as far as the eye could see, and night was falling. With luck I’d be in Reno well before midnight. Nothing but blackness out there, no moon, no stars, no lights except my own high beams. Once in a great while, a car passing in the other direction forced both drivers to dim their lights. That was the only change from the steady, loud engine sound.

Suddenly, I saw what looked like fireworks ahead of me maybe a half mile or so. I slowed down, the retinal memory of the sparks still visible to me. Peering out into the high beams, I could now make out a car. Not just any car, a red Alpha-Romeo. I pulled over on the shoulder and I could see two people standing there looking like they were in shock. It was a couple, the woman holding a baby. The front of the Alpha was completely smashed in, like the cars you see in a junkyard, the front compressed by a foot or more.

“Are you ok?”, I asked. Stupid question, but what other ice-breaker would anyone come up with? They nodded, but appeared to be absorbed by something just off the road. Then I saw it, an elk, huge, bigger than their car. The sparks I saw were from the headlights smashing and whatever else was thrown up into that broken light show. Then a semi truck pulled over behind us. The trucker, a big, beefy guy with a Chevrolet cap, climbed down. He was gripping the biggest-ass knife I’d ever seen. I could see the

light from my headlights in his eyes as he limped towards us. Several horror movie scenarios whizzed in my head. The couple, Italian tourists they had explained in broken English, weren't looking particularly reassured, either.

The trucker cracked a big smile and said, "You gotta watch out for elk in this country. They so big, they think they own the road, ain't afraid a nothin'." He then knelt down next to the huge animal and started to skin it. "Meat'll go bad fast, gotta deal with it right away. You folks good?" I was amazed the people, especially the baby were not at all injured, just badly shaken. I offered the folks a lift to the next town. As we were leaving, the truck driver had set his bright spotlight on the carcass and was skinning away. I dropped the couple and their baby off at the next town with a motel. I took them in to make sure they would be able to make arrangements in the morning for towing. They were grateful and wanted to offer me money, which I of course refused.

I'll never see a red Alpha Romeo again without remembering that trip.

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What would any first published work of fiction be without giving thanks to the writers who came before and the people, friends and family who somehow participated, willingly or not, in the advancement of the work?

When I was a teenager, I loved science fiction before anyone called it speculative. I immersed myself in the worlds created by Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov, Harlan Ellison and so many others. I was a typical geek, building FM radio transmitters in a Seattle suburb and TV cameras in our Minneapolis basement. I dropped out of the U of M after just one quarter, so I read some things I would have been assigned to read in Humanities class, like Ernest Hemingway, and that also took me to new places. With Somerset Maugham, I traveled through a world not too far from the one be portrayed in the TV series Downton Abbey. When I discovered Tom Robbins, it expanded my imagination further without any illicit substances. For laughing out loud, Carl Hiaasen, whose name I have to look up every time to spell correctly, is the ticket.

I am so lucky to have in my past and present, people who inspire me with their depth of character, fortitude, and generosity. I've met so many people over the globe who have has a positive influence, if I try to name names, the book would have 40 extra pages. Some are people who I have never met in person (I'm looking at you, Pastor C. and Ali A, creators who stepped up as if we were longtime friends). Others have lived with me for over 40 years. Thank you, dear Dr ELR. I've been privileged to spend quality time with writers of our time, too, Dewey, Jane, Don, and Petie, to name but a few. The "Dyork!" command and pantononic RTC technologies take their name from old friends, too. I have been lucky to live 3/4 of a century and experience life from the

early days, before technology changed everything to the present where you can have deep relationships with people you will never see in person.

Music

The 160 tracks of my music are available on streaming and sales platforms, including Amazon Music, Apple Music, Spotify, iTunes, Deezer, Tidal, YouTube and many other regional sites. Many are instrumentals representing a sample of my half century of composing in many genres.

Find my music online: <https://ffm.bio/randulo>